

Designing West Northamptonshire's Food Plan: a community engagement project

Internal funding report

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Executive summary

Introduction

The West Northants Sustainable Food Network (SFN) have been creating a robust and locally relevant food plan in order to set a strategic approach to addressing food-related public health challenges.

The SFN began their community engagement plans by conducting a stakeholder workshop with local partners in July 2024 to generate themes that are important to incorporate into the Food Plan:

Food Plan themes:

1. Food and nutrition - Recognise that good food is crucial to health and wellbeing
2. Food insecurity - Ensure equal access to healthy food and the emphasis is on prevention of food poverty
3. Community food and growing - Enable and empower a vibrant, skilled community food and growing sector and build a local good food movement
4. Commercial food production, processing and logistics - Focus on improving sustainability and food security across growing, farming, production
5. Food economy and employment - Encourage a vibrant, prosperous, diverse sustainable food economy
6. Catering and procurement - Transforming catering and procurement and invigorating local and sustainable food supply chains
7. Food waste and sustainability - Focus on food waste reduction, food reuse and recycling and impact on the climate and nature emergency

This current project was conducted between November 2024 and July 2025. It sought to drive the development of the Food Plan forward, by conducting community conversations with the West Northants local community to develop a clear understanding of what the Food Plan should look like and how to collaboratively achieve this.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this project was to enable the West Northants Food Plan to be informed and shaped by the opinions, experiences and needs of relevant stakeholders and public within West Northants. This will enable the Food Plan to be designed to be most relevant to the people who are affected by it.

To achieve this, the following questions were included in this project:

1. Examples of what already works in West Northants in relation to its Food Plan (e.g. food governance and strategy; sustainable food; healthy food; tackling inequalities that drive food insecurity);
2. What are the gaps or challenges that are faced in shaping the Food Plan;
3. What opportunities are there and what actions need to be taken in order to maximise the successes and alleviate the challenges faced in shaping the Food Plan.

Results

A total of 10 stakeholders that related to the food system in some way in the West Northamptonshire area participated in this project through interviews and focus groups. Their areas of expertise included: Catering; Community food aid; Procurement; Business growth; Retail; Warehouse and transportation; Food and Health; Food production; Cooking and growing. In addition, a total of 15 people accessing food aid services (including food banks and food pantries) participated in the project through interviews, from the following locations: Dallington, Moulton, Brixworth, and Briars Hill.

Stakeholder results

The stakeholders provided important insights into the various strengths, challenges and opportunities for the development and implementation of the West Northants Food Plan. These insights span various parts of the food system and span the 7 themes within the Food Plan and beyond those themes. The themes within the results all hold importance in and of themselves, however the detailed discussions highlight how the themes interrelate with one another as well as factors beyond the themes themselves.

For example, high costs of living was alluded to throughout the stakeholder narratives and featured in most of the themes, where stakeholders emphasised how the cost of living makes it challenging to prioritise healthy food purchases due to the cost of food (Theme 1 food and nutrition), has contributed to the increasing use of food aid services (Theme 2 food insecurity), increasing cost in food production reflected in farming, catering and retail (Theme 4 commercial food production and logistics), pay rates failing to rise in line with the cost of living (Theme 5 food economy and employment), and fragile supply chains due to various pressures associated with cost of living (Theme 6 catering and procurement). This is one example which highlights the complex and multifactorial nature of food systems transformation.

Some clear strengths in the local food system were highlighted within the stakeholder narratives. There are clearly some meaningful infrastructures in place that support the food system, for example:

- there is food aid provision available to people at risk of food insecurity including those in some more rural parts West Northants (Theme 2 food insecurity);
- there are community initiatives in place to empower communities to grow, cook, and eat good food (Theme 3 community food and growing)
- there are numerous strategies in place in various sectors that contribute to food waste reduction and environmental sustainability (Theme 7 food waste and sustainability).

Stakeholders also described numerous challenges to consider in the transformation plans within the Food Plan, for example:

- cost of living crisis and its various impacts (as described above);
- food policies limiting how much or what food destined for waste can be re-used and redirected to people and places that would benefit from it;
- the need for education around food, cooking and the food system.

Within these strengths and challenges, numerous opportunities and considerations were illuminated that should be considered for future growth and development:

- maximise on projects and initiatives that are already established which show a clear role and impacts that interact with the Food Plan themes and beyond;

- consider taking forward the various ideas explored for providing education about food, cooking and the food system;
- consider the ideas and clear appetite for community growing opportunities for the public;

Food aid recipient results

The interviews with food aid recipients also provided important insights into the experiences of users, staff and volunteers of four food aid services in the Northampton area. The results highlighted opportunities for improvements as well as identifying important aspects of food services that are currently offered that were valued by the participants. The findings illustrate how an understanding of the experience and varying perceptions of food services could help the local authority to support more food insecure members of the community to access the services. In addition, there is an opportunity to attract more people who choose to pay for the service, recognising the broader benefits including social interaction and waste reduction.

Participants described physical barriers such as travelling to the services as well as the availability of certain foods and a lack of knowledge concerning the protocol of using the services based on a referral. The importance of dignity when using a service was a frequent topic raised by the participants and the benefits of making the service feel like a regular shopping experience was expressed by needs-based users. Positive marketing of the service that destigmatises use of the food service along with the normalisation of using a food service may alleviate the embarrassment some users may feel. The perception of the service offering lower quality food was reflected in the participants perception of tinned foods and foods close to or at their best before dates. This may further link to user sense of dignity and an association with the food aid provided being lower quality food.

Whilst one volunteer explained that a nutritionist had previously been brought in to educate around healthy eating and meal preparation this had been poorly attended. It would be useful to understand more about the barriers associated with this initiative and understand if there are opportunities to provide further effectively promoted appropriate educational events.

By using the food services some participants felt they were doing their part to combat food waste and there was a sense of pride about using up food that would otherwise be thrown away. The social aspect of the service and the community benefits especially to those who are living alone was a significant theme. The complimentary services such as tea and a meal along with the opportunity to interact with others in a community space was perceived as valuable. There may be an opportunity to explore and expand upon as the social aspect of the food services was found to be varied across each location. This was particularly evident in the lack of community growing space and provision that was not available in any of the services in this study but was referenced by participants as a benefit at another service they were aware of. A further opportunity may be to explore this in more detail and how the concept of community growing could be incorporated into existing services.

Next steps

This project provides an in-depth account of the voice of local stakeholders and residents of West Northants related to food. These voices will enable the West Northants Food Plan to be positively shaped in meaningful and locally relevant ways. Those driving the local Food Plan can use these findings to maximise the current strengths within the food system infrastructure, reflect on the challenges, and identify ways to take forward the many opportunities and ideas presented for driving improvements to the local food system.

Following on from this current project, future opportunities are available to conduct further research and/or co-design work with local community to drive forward the ideas that will strengthen the Food Plan. For example, if next steps are to take forward ideas to provide community growing opportunities, the researchers would be happy to develop these ideas further, conduct co-design work with the public to meaningfully design these ideas, and build and implement an evaluation of the community growing initiatives.

Overview of project

The West Northants Sustainable Food Network (SFN) have been creating a robust and locally relevant food plan in order to set a strategic approach to addressing food-related public health challenges. This current project sought to drive the development of the Food Plan forward, by conducting community conversations with the West Northants local community to develop a clear understanding of what the Food Plan should look like and how to collaboratively achieve this. The West Northants community includes, but is not limited to, the general public, farmers, food business, as well as representative partners of the SFN (comprising the council, health, the education sector, voluntary organisations and campaign groups). This project has therefore been the crucial next step to ensuring the Food Plan is designed with the local population it is being designed for.

West Northamptonshire are facing important food-related public health challenges and inequalities, which have implications on health and wellbeing, weight status, environmental sustainability, food insecurity, and a variety of other public health issues. The SFN are developing a whole systems approach to the West Northamptonshire food environment to promote better health, wellbeing and environmental outcomes for the West Northamptonshire community and the planet. The SFN began their community engagement plans by conducting a stakeholder workshop with local partners in July 2024 to generate themes that are important to incorporate into the Food Plan (see Table 1), including key goals to be taken forward, and the current strengths and challenges faced to the attainment of these goals.

West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) are a core partner of the SFN, and agreed to collaborate with the University of Northampton (UON) through this current project to enable public engagement to be embedded into the development of the Food Plan. Together, the partnership between WNC, the SFN and the UON in this project has enabled the West Northants Food Plan to be developed iteratively with partners and the wider community, testing themes and issues and actions along the way. This current project therefore provides an ideal platform in which to build and strengthen

relationships through co-produced research with local partners and community within West Northants, to drive forward a robust and locally relevant Food Plan.

Table 1: Food Plan themes

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|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Food and nutrition - Recognise that good food is crucial to health and well-being;2. Food insecurity - Ensure equal access to healthy food and the emphasis is on prevention of food poverty;3. Community food and growing - Enable and empower a vibrant, skilled community food and growing sector and build a local good food movement;4. Commercial food production, processing and logistics - Focus on improving sustainability and food security across growing, farming, production;5. Food economy and employment - Encourage a vibrant, prosperous, diverse sustainable food economy;6. Catering and procurement - Transforming catering and procurement and invigorating local and sustainable food supply chains;7. Food waste and sustainability - Focus on food waste reduction, food reuse and recycling and impact on the climate and nature emergency. |
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Aims and objectives

The aim of this project was to enable the West Northants Food Plan to be informed and shaped by the opinions, experiences and needs of relevant stakeholders and public within West Northants. This will enable the Food Plan to be designed to be most relevant to the people who are affected by it.

To achieve this, the following questions were included in this project:

1. Examples of what already works in West Northants in relation to its Food Plan (e.g. food governance and strategy; sustainable food; healthy food; tackling inequalities that drive food insecurity);
2. What are the gaps or challenges that are faced in shaping the Food Plan;
3. What opportunities are there and what actions need to be taken in order to maximise the successes and alleviate the challenges faced in shaping the Food Plan.

Methods

Design

The community conversations were enabled through a qualitative design consisting of interviews and focus groups, broken down into two phases.

Phase 1 included interviews and focus groups with stakeholders.

Phase 2 included interviews with people who access food aid organisations.

The aim of phase 1 was to understand the perspectives of various stakeholders in terms of the seven themes generated within the Food Plan. All three of the overarching project themes were addressed in these interviews and focus groups (what works; challenges; future opportunities).

The aim of phase 2 was to understand what food-related issues impact people accessing food aid organisations. For example, what factors influence their access to food for sustenance and food for nutritious, healthy eating; how would they acquire food beyond the access of the food aid organisation. All three of the overarching project themes were addressed in these interviews and focus groups (what works; challenges; future opportunities).

Engagement with Stakeholders

Participants

Participants were 10 stakeholders that related to the food system in some way in the West Northamptonshire area. Participants were identified and recruited with support from the Sustainable Food Network (SFN).

Table 2 provides demographic information captured about the participants, including sex, and areas of expertise (related to the Food Plan).

Table 2: Stakeholder Participant Demographic Information

Participant Characteristics (N=10)	
Sex	
Female	3
Male	7
Stakeholder areas of expertise	
Hospital catering	Warehouse and transport
Community food aid	Food and health
Procurement	Community food production
Catering in education	Cooking and growing
Business growth	Farming
Food retail and catering	

Recruitment and data collection

The SFN provided a list (recruitment spreadsheet) of stakeholders in West Northants, all of which were mapped against the seven Food Plan themes the stakeholders predominantly align with. Mapping stakeholders in this way enabled the researcher to purposively sample and target different stakeholders across all of the Food Plan themes, to ensure data could be captured about all of the Food Plan themes. Across the seven Food Plan themes, examples of relevant stakeholders included:

- Health coaches
- Social prescribers
- Weight management services
- Health professionals
- Public health commissioners
- Farmers
- Surplus food distribution
- Chefs, cooks, and caterers
- Food aid organisers

The researcher created a template email and sent it potential stakeholder participants on the recruitment spreadsheet. The email informed stakeholders about the purpose of the project, and inviting them to attend an interview or focus group. Participants that expressed an interest were emailed a participant information sheet to read in advance of the data collection day.

On arrival at the focus group, participants were will once again be given a copy of the participant information sheet, as well as a consent form to confirm they were happy to participate, and a demographics form to enable the researchers to know more the participants engaged in the research.

It was originally planned that one focus group per food plan theme (with 3-8 per focus group) was going to be conducted. However, due to busy workloads and difficulties organising a mutually convenient time and location for specific stakeholders to attend. Consequently, a mix of interviews and focus groups were conducted, with stakeholders with varying experience related to the seven food plan themes rather than one specific area of expertise (e.g. food waste). This actually became a strength of the data collection; mixed interests and expertise within a group enabled other stakeholders within the group to think about concepts across the seven Food Plan themes rather than focusing just on one or two themes within the Food Plan.

Across the 10 participants, 6 separate data collection instances took place:

- 3 one-to-one interviews
- 2 two-person interview
- 1 three-person focus group

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were the method of data collection with an interview guide created to facilitate the questions. Questions used at the beginning of data collection included an icebreaker to build rapport and help the participants relax and share some information about themselves. The main questions were related to stakeholder perspectives of the strengths, challenges, and future opportunities in relation to the seven Food Plan themes. The questions enabled relevant questions to be asked while also enabling enough flexibility for elaboration and clarifications of concepts discussed.

Interviews and focus groups lasted between 62 minutes and 96 minutes, and were therefore in-depth interviews and covered a range of relevant topics in great detail. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim ready for analysis.

Engagement with Food aid community

Participants

Participants were 15 people accessing food aid services (food banks and food pantries) in the West Northamptonshire area. Participants were therefore identified and recruited through food aid services at the following locations of West Northamptonshire: Dallington, Moulton, Brixworth and Briar Hill. The locations were chosen if the food aid organisation agreed to support participant recruitment to the study, and had guests accessing their services who met the following study inclusion criteria:

- (1) A user of the food aid service
- (2) A member of staff or a volunteer working at the food service
- (3) English speaking
- (4) Able for provide full consent to participate

Participants were either approached by the researchers whilst waiting to enter the food aid organisation, or were introduced to the researchers by a member of staff or volunteer after they had used the organisation's services. Staff and volunteer participants were approached when the service had closed for the day.

Table 3 provides demographic information captured about the participants, including sex, ethnicity, and job role/employment status.

Table 3: Food Aid Participant Demographic Information

Participant Characteristics (N=15)	
Sex	
Female	9
Male	6
Ethnicity	
White British	11
White and Black African	1
White and Black Caribbean	1
Indian	1

Eastern European	1
Job	
Healthcare assistant	1
Office worker	1
Unemployed	8
Retired	3
Volunteer	2

Recruitment and data collection

Prior to conducting the research, the researchers liaised with the Sustainable Food Network Project Manager for West Northants to visit each proposed organisation the research would take place. The researcher's visited five locations with the Project Manager and were introduced to the staff and volunteers at each location. This enabled the researchers to familiarise themselves with the environments and determine the logistics for recruitment and data collection within these environments. This was a useful exercise in considering the suitability of locations for conducting the research to ensure there was a suitable quiet space for the interviews to take place. It also created an opportunity to talk to staff and volunteers about the most appropriate way to approach potential participants and understand how the service operated (e.g. queueing system, ticket process). On this basis, it was determined that one of the locations (Ash Street) was not possible to conduct the research in since there were no quiet spaces (this service also closed down during the data collection period).

All locations ran on a dual model basis of a food bank and food larder where people were referred to access the service free of charge (on production of a code given by social services, the participant was allocated a certain amount of free items based upon family/household size). Users of this service were able to choose their own items rather than being given a pre-determined bag of food chosen by the staff/volunteers. In addition, the general public could also pay to use the service as a larder to buy as many items as they wished at much reduced prices compared with other shops. At all locations there was an orderly queueing system using tickets to ensure the number of visitors using the service was limited at any time. This ensured that crowding was not a problem, and people were able to move smoothly around the service to select their items.

As data collection took place in the food service locations, appropriate quiet areas were identified to conduct the interviews, respecting participant privacy and to ensure that interruptions were kept to a minimum since the participants may be discussing sensitive information about topics that they may feel uncomfortable sharing publicly.

Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a participant information sheet. Those who agreed to participate (N=15) were asked to sign a consent form to confirm they were happy to participate, and complete a demographics form capturing sex, ethnicity, and job role/ employment status.

Semi-structured interviews were the method of data collection with an interview guide created to facilitate the questions. Questions used at the beginning of data collection included an icebreaker to build rapport and help the participants relax and share some information about themselves. The follow up prompts explored topics including the participants attitude to healthy food, use of food aid organisations and influences on diet and food choices based on the seven themes of West Northamptonshire's Food Plan and were designed to gather richer, more in-depth data. The researchers were cautious not to lead the participants into providing answers that may have been expected; they did this by asking neutral questions within the interview guide that would elicit rich responses.

Participation consisted of a single interview that lasted between 6 - 27 minutes, with a mean length of interview of 14 minutes. The shortest interview reflected the views of a busy parent who had already collected their food and only had a short amount of time to participate. The participant was also new to the food service (first time user) and therefore their experience of the service was limited. This was reflected in the brevity of the interview.

Analysis

All interview and focus group audio recordings were uploaded to the UON SharePoint and transcribed by a professional transcriber. The transcripts were then coded and themes created using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The 10 stakeholder transcripts and 15 transcripts of the food aid recipient interviews were analysed systematically using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method involved several stages of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Data analysis was conducted using NVIVO software to organise the data codes, themes and subthemes. Initially the transcripts were read and re-read for the researcher to become familiarised with the overall content. During this time, notes were made about potential codes and themes. The second phase of analysis involved the development

of a list of codes that identified any feature of the data that was important and noteworthy. An inductive approach was adopted where coding was driven by the data.

The codes were then examined by the researcher for ways in which they could be grouped to form themes and subthemes.

Results (findings and analysis)

Stakeholder results

Overall opinions about the food plan themes

The stakeholders reflected on the entirety of the West Northants Food Plan and felt that all of the themes within the food plan hold importance and value:

“Everything that they are looking at as part of the Food Plan is definitely important to our local economy here, especially to the people that live here.” (S1)

Similarly, many of the themes discussed with stakeholders typically spanned multiple themes rather than isolated themes, highlighting that themes often interlink and influence one another. For example, one of the stakeholders focus on food insecurity and food waste:

“My driver is the combination of reducing waste and reducing food poverty.” (S2P2)

Another stakeholder focusing on farming and agriculture discuss the importance of health and welfare of humans, animals and environment:

“I think talking about that health agenda we talked about earlier, about the health of the animal, health of the environment and health of the human, I think we impact all of those. Not only because we offer courses in sport and nutrition, a key part of all of our curriculum for students, it’s about healthy eating, healthy living. We have very high animal welfare here. We produce lamb, we produce beef, and we produce crops - wheat, barley, oil seed rape, those sorts of things. We are making sure the inputs into that are healthy inputs. We are not organic, that’s a different conversation to have, the reasons why not. But we are very much around what inputs are going in there for the quality of the produce, is the best it can be to support the health of the humans. So, I think there’s lots that we could be involved with from that point of view.” (S3)

Themes and subthemes

The stakeholders provided insightful comments about a range of themes related to the food plan. Table 4 shows the themes raised within the stakeholder interviews and

focus groups (in line with the Food Plan themes), as well as the subthemes within these themes.

Table 4: Stakeholder themes and subthemes

Food and nutrition • The importance of food and nutrition • The cost of food affects food-related decision-making • The role of food marketing in food-related decision-making
Food poverty and insecurity • Food insecurity is on the rise • Food aid redistributes food destined for waste to people who need it • Food aid as a platform for meeting nutritional needs • Social opportunities in food aid • Choice and dignity in food aid • Cultural appropriateness of food aid • Providing food aid in food deserts • Adaptations of community food aid • Equal access to healthy food is an ambitious aim • Multiple deprivations • Food insecurity in student community
Community food and growing • Local desire to grow food • Community growing spaces to promote growing activities
Commercial food production and logistics • The cost of food production • Improving animal welfare • Pressure in hospitality and food production • Opportunities and threats in farming and agriculture
Food economy and employment • Economic impacts of purchasing decisions and business viability • Economy in frozen food sector is stable • Pay rates in NHS catering

• Mental health and welfare in farming and catering
Catering and procurement • Cost implications in catering and procurement • Local supply chains • Strong teamwork and leadership drives positive, impactful, and sustainable change • Food policy and regulations in catering • Food preferences and familiarity • Building procurement policy to support local supply
Food waste and sustainability • Responsibilities in food waste and sustainability • Balancing food waste and sustainability against other priorities • Strategies to manage food waste and sustainability • Strategies towards sustainability in farming • Focus on small to medium size businesses
Education • Reflecting education within the Food Plan • Education needs to remove connotations around environmental sustainability • Educating about food preparation and food waste • Educating about food, food system, and nutrition • Educating about seasonality • The role of education establishments in food-related education
Further considerations • Sustainable change • Networking

At the end of the results, a case study is provided which pulls together discussions from one of the stakeholders about a community initiative. The case study reflects on the need for the initiative, its impacts and its legacies. This has been presented in this report because it provides a real account of the role that food-related community initiatives can have as part of local Food Plan.

Theme 1: Food and nutrition

The importance of food and nutrition

Stakeholders provided examples of the important role diet and nutrition plays in health and wellbeing:

"For the last five years I've been looking after your diet and things like that for the people who have cancer and stuff like that, background. And I can say obviously your diet is critical in terms of your health because just at any point it can trigger a change. I've got somebody who's been doing everything correct and still ended up getting cancer. And all things point towards the diet, more than anything else, so I do think that it's a massive important stuff. She doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, anything, active lifestyle. And the only factor is the diet. Even with diet, she's really good with it but still something caused it. So, something there to keep an eye on really." (S4P5)

One of the stakeholders reflected on the ways in which they encourage their workforce to eat 'healthy and hearty' meals, recognising the need for nutritious food as well as food that will sustain people working in manual roles:

"For me, our team, they are working in a frozen environment for eight-hour shifts. We work with a catering team that are ensure that the food is that they receive on their breaks is nutritious and hearty. I use the word, 'hearty' and we see a [inaudible] in the nutritious benefit of the food and then also not only around but performance as well whilst they are working within that environment. It's quite calorie dense but that's not necessarily a bad thing because they need the energy to work properly." (S4P7)

Similarly, one of the stakeholders working in wholefoods retail discussed how they work with a healthy food specialist to regularly encourage customers to eat healthily:

"It's [food and nutrition] obviously important. We are working with Wendy Jardin, if you've come across here before. She in a past life used to run the healthy food hubs in Northampton so she's coming in about once a month to try and demystify healthy foods and try and encourage people to eat healthily. For her, it's a mission because she's seen so many people with cancers that, although it's not a cure for cancer it can help the process of the medication and so forth. And obviously it helps towards preventing diseases that might come up. It is a mission of ours." (S4P6)

At a household level, one of the stakeholders described the importance of families cooking and eating together to maximise the important role that food plays in people's lives:

"A lot of it is down to those things that you can't really quantify in terms of when you sit down and you've cooked a meal, and you are maybe getting the kids to help you cook the meal. My six-year-old, 'Yes Mummy, I'm going to do-', yes, off you go! But sitting down and eating that meal, all of that is so important in terms of the quality of that relationship, the bonds. That's gorgeous, lovely. Food is kind of everything. Without it we are a bit scuppered. Food, shelter, etc, it's those basic needs and it fulfils a lot more than just putting food in your tummy so that you have energy and grow. There's a lot to it." (S5P8)

These discussions all highlight that people have awareness of the importance of nutrition within people's lives.

The cost of food affects food-related decision-making

In the catering sector, one of the stakeholders reflected on how they have the flexibility to cook a range of foods and how they care about offering healthy foods, however they also have to factor in the high costs of fruit and vegetables within the foods they offer in catering:

"We have a set menu here and I encourage the team upstairs in the restaurant to do what they want as long as it's affordable. There are some things that I will only allow them to put on the menu occasionally because of the cost. For instance, last year cauliflowers - I don't know how they got so expensive, but you were looking at £3 for a cauliflower and even as a business we can't afford £3 for a cauliflower. But, if they've got the vision for it and they can show me the costings for it and they can show that not necessarily they are going to make a massive profit but that we are not going to lose money, they can do what they want. Peas and carrots every day are boring, it's not variety. So, if we can go to our fruit and veg suppliers and say, 'I want red chard, I want to try some chard; I want to use some heritage vegetables and have some vibrant colours going through our veg', and it's cost effective for us to purchase and produce, then they can do that." (S1)

Echoing these sentiments at individual and household levels, one of the stakeholders described how the Food Plan, if it seeks to encourage people to make healthy food decisions, there needs to be focus on the food costs as this is one of the biggest drivers in people's food-related decision making:

"I do think any plan, if the goal is how do we get West Northants making better choices with food, making sure there's no food poverty, food scarcity, that sort of thing, within people's decision making, I think the majority of people will make a decision, especially this day and age, on price, and price alone. So, any kind of solution has to consider that. So, if it is we are going down the 'just providing food

in general', then that's one thing. If it's trying to push people to a healthier option, almost like a holistic medicine approach and going from that way, then price has to be considered because people aren't going to make a change if it's going to cost more. Unfortunately, that's the truth." (S4P7)

Building on this, one of the stakeholders reflected on how rising food costs has made it difficult for people from disadvantaged backgrounds (in particular) to make healthy food decisions:

"We've all seen food prices increase enormously, good food, and it just makes life difficult for people on the poverty line to access nutritious food. It's so easy to get your packet and you stick it in the microwave, whatever, and not think about it. But the way that the economy has gone, good food prices it's made life difficult for everybody." (S4P6)

Within that, the following stakeholder describes how important it is to adjust healthy eating standards according to people's contextual circumstances and 'meeting people where they are at':

"I also think that when people are on a low budget and you start talking about nutrition, actually they are not really registering it. I think we've got to meet people where they are at, so if people are accessing things like Food Larders or food banks, you've got to say - and I know it's not the best - they might get a tin of butter beans or kidney beans and you can say, 'If you cook it this way, this will be the nutritional value for you rather than just going to a McDonald's and buying some French fries.' It's about meeting people where they are at. They do need to know the nutrition benefits, but we'd need to bring it to them in a way that they can understand. When people are hungry and they haven't got much income and you starting to tell them about all the nutritional impact of this food, they are like, 'And? I can barely afford to eat!'." (S5P9)

The role of food marketing in food-related decision-making

In one of the focus groups, the stakeholders reflected on the how the marketing of food products can be misleading, often labelling products in positive ways (e.g. healthy, organic, low sugar) that make the public believe they are making healthy food decisions:

"P7: ...nothing is labelled as UPF or as..."

P5: That would be suicidal.

P7: Yes, it would be business suicide, it would be. But they do the complete opposite, and they will say it's got a natural taste, that sort of stuff. So, I feel in reality we should go in one direction but because of the nature of this country as we are, it's pulling us the other way, so it's definitely conflicting.

P5: This probably might relate but in a different way, I got some supplements from Boots, I think it was, and I saw it had ginkgo and something else - it was all natural and to boost energy. I was like, 'Oh, fantastic. I'll take it. This is actually working for me, it's really good'. She was reading the ingredients, and they listed all the good stuff but when you get into the back it's posted all the negative stuff - caffeine, X, Y, all this kind of stuff in it. So technically it wasn't a natural product, it was just natural ingredients. They market it as it was a natural thing but if you look at all the other ingredients, the majority of it was all the bad stuff but what it said on the label was three natural ingredients. The whole thing about twisting the reality of what it is, that really made me feel sick. Technically speaking what else has been marketed in this - put a spin on it?

P7: Yes, or a tin of beans that's full of sugar, 'This is one of your five a day'. A mother that is trying to do well by her children might think that's a good thing, filling up with sugary baked beans because it's one of their five a day. It's vegetable but in reality, if you check the ingredients list there's 35 ingredients. I do believe there is more attention in that area, and I think people are more aware of it. Do you know who's doing a good job in that? Boutique stores. They are being a lot more upfront and transparent." (S4)

Theme 2: Food poverty and insecurity

Food insecurity is on the rise

Many of the stakeholders recognised that food insecurity is high and continuing to rise:

"Obviously food poverty has got ridiculous in recent years. Not that it's never been there, but I think it's been highlighted a lot more in the last couple of years, especially since the pandemic." (S1)

"It's [food insecurity] a national crisis at the moment." (S3)

"Something interesting somebody said to me was we're not in a promising time, we're in survival time right now in some sense. If you look at some of the numbers in terms of poverty and how many people have got into poverty over the last year and a half, two years, or even over the last five years, it's almost the same as over the last 25

years but spaced over a five-year period. Possibly even over the last two years.” (S4P5)

The issue of food insecurity exists even among working households:

“I think there’s a lot of food insecurity right now and people don’t know what to do about it. From my observations it’s not just people who are on universal credit who are struggling with that food insecurity. People are working, both husband and wife are working, and they can just about afford to put food on the table. So how do we address that?” (S5P9)

In an earlier theme about food and nutrition, stakeholders reflected on the rising costs of food and how this makes it difficult for people to make healthy food decisions. Relating to this, one of the stakeholders highlighted that, alongside rising food costs, there are clear increases in people accessing food crisis services:

“I think you can see the increase in prices recently, well for the last several years. We work closely with a local charity, the Hope Centre. One of our colleagues’ volunteers there very week, it’s one of their passions, and some of our team will then assist them with volunteering. Some of the feedback that we get from them to say how many people are using that service, yes it’s frightening really.” (S4P7)

Food aid redistributes food destined for waste to people who need it

The food aid stakeholder reflected on a core benefit of running a food larder, as food that is otherwise destined for waste gets redistributed and utilised by people who need it, particularly those who are at risk of food insecurity:

“My driver is the combination of reducing waste and reducing food poverty. We’ve been running our Larder for coming for three years this summer and we are as strong as we ever were. We’re not declining in numbers, we’re not particularly growing in numbers, and we offer an alternative source of food that helps people who unsurprisingly are struggling with the cost of living. Running the Larder means I see large amounts of food which needs a good home.” (S2P2)

Food aid as a platform for meeting nutritional needs

The food aid stakeholder discussed the ways in which community food larders provide fruit and vegetables as well as unhealthy foods within the service offering:

"... we make our fruit and veg free - or included, because you can't just walk in and ask for a bag of fruit and veg, you do actually have to do a shop to get the fruit and veg. But we also unavoidably do have stuff that is nutritionally not very good because we get what we get from FareShare, and FareShare send us what they've got. So, we may end up with 15 giant boxes of Monster Munch or something like that and we've just got to live with it." (S2P2)

This stakeholder highlighted that one of the core challenges among people experiencing food insecurity, is that there is a propensity to prioritise cheaper and highly processed foods over more expensive, nutritionally dense food:

"We have a lot of people who come to our Larder who will say, 'I come for the fruit and veg', because the actual cost of fruit and veg and the perishability of fruit and veg means that for many people, that's the first thing that goes. You can go to Iceland and fill your freezer with chicken nuggets, £1.50 pizzas, processed potato rubbish for pennies. But if you wanted a six pack of apples, a packet of salad, a cucumber and tomatoes - when people are hungry, they are going to go for the calorie dense foods, not the nutritionally dense foods, and that's an unfortunate reality. Also, that stuff in the freezer or stuff in cans will last. You don't even have to know how to cook it so it's good for low training households. It's really sad, the worst kind of food is being eaten by the people that need it the most - processed food is so much cheaper than proper food, that's just wrong." (S2P2)

Another stakeholder echoed these views, highlighting that many foods available in food aid organisations often do not meet a person's nutritional and satiety needs:

"When you said about Larders, I'm part of the Brixworth Food Larder. Unless they've changed it recently, the vegetables are all free. So, once you've paid for your bits you get - which is great, you can make up soups and the rest of it. But up until recently I'd have gone, 'Yes, this is really good for me; why am I starving afterwards? It's got no protein in it so it's not helping you to be fuller. And as a person who was born in 1980's, everything was carbohydrates, you need all these carbohydrates. I can eat a bowl full of porridge and I'm hungry in half an hour. So, if you are not pairing it with the right things, so you've got that soup there, if people don't know, it's amazing, so trying to help people understand the ingredients they've got, when there's something that's not really selling very well, I go, 'Okay, this is really good in soup'." (S5P8)

However, the following stakeholder reflected on some meaningful initiatives taking place in supermarkets that offer nutritional opportunities to the public:

"I'd like to highlight the amazing job that Lidl do. Lidl is one of my supermarkets I visit every month, and their £1.50 box of excess veg - you have to be in there pretty early in the morning, you have to get lucky, you have to be looking for them because

they put them on the wrong side of the tills. But they will go through every morning and swoop up all the fruit and veg that is more than they need, not necessarily that it's particularly close to its use by, best before date. They make up a mixed box of fruit and veg and it's usually £1.50. I know exactly what all fruit and veg costs, some of them can be £12-15 worth of fruit and veg.” (S2P2)

Social opportunities in food aid

The food aid stakeholder described how the food larder provides important social opportunities for many people who access the service:

“P3: Is it quite a social occasion?

P2: Oh, ever so, yes. People come up to an hour and a half before we start. In the summer or when the weather is nice, we will sit out on the grass outside, sometimes we'll have a bit of a picnic. Once they get inside, we've got free tea and coffee and squash for the kids. Certain times of year we'll have mince pies or bits and bobs; we'll soon be buying all our chocolate bunnies for Easter.” (S2)

Choice and dignity in food aid

The food aid stakeholder discussed important ways in which food larders provide opportunities for people to choose their foods (which differentiates from a food bank, where people have food given to them), and how choice alleviates difficult feelings that arise from using food aid services such as shame and embarrassment:

“The main difference with the larders is that people choose what they get. I think a lot of people feel, ‘Oh God, my life is completely screwed because I have to go to a food bank’, and that is really sad. The worst thing is to need help and feel bad about receiving it.” (S2P2)

Cultural appropriateness of food aid

In this discussion, the stakeholder describes how food aid provision needs to consider the cultural appropriateness of its food offer:

“...not just accessible for people on low incomes but people from different ethnic backgrounds as well, because sometimes what might be in some of the food larders, somebody from another country will be, ‘I don't eat any of that’. And again, it's

something I've thought about, being at the Hope Centre, that actually how do we address that imbalance for people?" (S5P9)

Providing food aid in food deserts

The food aid stakeholder reflected on the need for food aid in areas such as villages that lack access to shops:

"There are villages in West Northants that have no shops, and if you are going to talk about access to food, that is a significant issue. Particularly for the elderly, who may not drive and may not be able to work out how to do a Tesco home delivery, that kind of thing. One of our larders is in such a village with no shops and it attracts a much older clientele who can't get out and are quite happy to moan about being charged what they get charged for a packet of custard creams. It's a very different atmosphere to the other larders." (S2P2)

Adaptations of community food aid

One of the food aid stakeholders discussed how services such as homeless charities have needed to adapt their services to respond to the growing issue of food insecurity, sometimes beyond the capacity or remit of the service:

"We've seen quite a transformation. We had the Hope Enterprise and we were running the warehousing and it was all getting too expensive. The Food Club expanded quite heavily during Covid, which was probably the right thing to do, but we suddenly found we were getting into a distribution business rather than looking after the homeless." (S2P3)

Equal access to healthy food is an ambitious aim

The food aid stakeholder reflected on the Food Plan's aspirations of 'ensuring equal access to healthy food and the emphasis is on prevention of food poverty', and felt that the ambitions were too aspirational:

"It's a lovely aspiration but I can't see that there will ever be equal access to the nutritious food any more than there will be equal access to good education, safe homes, roads without potholes. It's a lovely idea but I think it's an aspiration, not a reality." (S2P2)

Multiple deprivations

In the following quote, the stakeholder describes how people experiencing food insecurity typically experience multiple challenges and deprivations, which makes it more difficult to alleviate food insecurity and access nutritious foods:

"Can I tell you a little story about a farmer in West Northants? The local Liberal Dems, we went on an evening trip to see this guy's farm. He has the most marvellous farm; he was raising little boy beef cows to generate the slurry that went on the fields to grow his potatoes. So, he had this lovely little circular farming thing, worked out. He told us that he took a bag of his potatoes - and they were the most beautiful, red skinned, lovely, lovely potatoes - he took them to the local food bank to make a donation. Two weeks later he went back to see if they wanted another bag and no-one had taken them. There's nobody taking them because if you haven't got money to buy food, you haven't got money to pay electricity or gas, and a baked potato needs to be in the oven for quite a long time. Or you need to have the skills to know what to do with a potato. The same people would merrily take a 2kg bag of chips but they wouldn't take potatoes. We said bring them to us, we can get rid of potatoes no problem at all because our larder members are on average older and more kitchen savvy than quite a lot of people. It's a shame." (S2P3)

Food insecurity in student community

The education sector stakeholder reflected on the rising problem of food insecurity within their student community, the effects of food insecurity on learning and wellbeing, and what they do to alleviate food insecurity:

"We've got food banks here now - as in for students, student parcels. We do food parcels for students who are really struggling in poverty and we are seeing more and more of that. I think that's something to focus on. I think probably because of their background, where they are coming from. So many are coming without breakfast. We have lots of free school meals students who get a lunchtime meal with us but that's no good if they've come with no breakfast. So, we are doing all we can to try and support that from that point of view." (S3)

Theme 3: Community food and growing

Local desire to grow food

Some of the stakeholders reflected on the local desire to grow food. For example, one of the stakeholders mentioned that the Hope Centre (providing crisis services for people experiencing homelessness) endeavour to use space to grow food, but they require more growing space to maximise their plans to achieve this:

"My daughter works for the Hope Centre and she's it's working on - their food project as well and trying to introduce good food. Growing of food, there's organisation or [inaudible word] rental who for many years have tried to set up little pockets of places where they can grow food, and so forth, and I'm sure there are other projects. And it's something we should try and encourage, this gardening type but it's finding the spaces, a lot of the time, to do that." (S4P6)

Similarly, the catering stakeholder reflected on their desire to grow their own produce for their hospital catering provision, but that they do not have the resources in which to do this. This stakeholder therefore reflected on their need to rely on good partnerships with local supplier for the supply of their produce, and the role that international supply has in the supply of produce:

"I haven't got two acres of land. Everything that we do here is on a massive scale. There is a little grow patch on site which used to be utilised. I think our volunteer services are looking to take that over. The last time I went down there it had some rhubarb in it and some rosemary because they just stay alive when nothing else does. If I had, I would love to have a field. If someone brought me a field and said, 'You can grow your own fruit and vegetables on it, here's the staff that you need, here's the budget that you need; this is what I want you to produce in a year', I'd do it in a heartbeat. But that's why we have suppliers, I suppose, it's very difficult. It would be a lot cheaper to bring everything in-house, but I would need so much space. I don't think you'd actually be able to do it for a place like this, it would be really tough to do - you just rely so much on other world countries to help pull your numbers up. Could you live without having a banana again or an orange? If you got rid of all of our overseas imports, we wouldn't have anything really, would we? Especially out of season, there would probably be famine, to be honest, because the actual growing space that we have in the UK is predominantly used for rapeseed or wheat or sugar cane, something like that." (S1)

This stakeholder reflected on a particular supplier that offers vertical growing opportunities and connect well with the public in their growing and production offer:

"I will take you to a farm and show you a vertical farm if you want to go and see one. The company is called Eat Curious, they are massive now. They are based in Northampton. His team are amazing. they will show anybody around who wants to go and have a look at it. They've built a little warehouse just outside their farmyard and it is a vertical farm. You can go in there, you can see what they are growing.

There's loads, there are endless possibilities, which is really good for this. It's a subject that I really like because although you can't grow, say, things like root vegetables because you need a lot of growing space, I think they've recently figured out how to do it with potatoes a few years ago. But especially greens, leafy greens, things like that, people are now producing health feed in vertical farms because they can grow it so quickly." (S1)

Community growing spaces to promote growing activities

With the lack of growing facilities in mind, one of the stakeholders described how the Food Plan community food and growing ambitions are 'admirable but unrealistic' within the community, due to lack of growing facilities:

"It's an admirable objective but it's the reality of when the rubber hits the road, how you measure it. It's very, very challenging. You have got a problem there that - houses are being put so close together with so little land, how can they possibly encourage people to grow their own fruit and veg when their back garden/front garden is the size of a postage stamp? And we all have metered water supply, which is probably a good thing, but it doesn't encourage you to have a great big garden. I actually have six water butts, which is perhaps a bit extreme, and almost as many compost bins, but I have a big garden, most people can't do that. To encourage people to grow their own, there's a long way to go, a really long way to go." (S2P3)

Building from this, some of the stakeholders highlighted that allotments provide opportunities (such as enjoyment, meaningful activity, physical and mental health) and challenges (such as cost, time, unpredictable outcomes) for community growing:

"P7: My parents have an allotment. They absolutely love it, not only a hobby but the food that they can get to it from well, and they do a fair bit. But the cost to produce the food, even though you are producing it yourself, is actually more expensive than if you were to buy it. You get a better product, and you know where it's been but it is ultimately more expensive. In order to make it a viable option it's got to be less expensive than what you can get it for off the shelf. And that will only come from economies of scale; that will only come from being able to have a community project for growing where those costs are spread across several parties.

P5: Championing what you said there, I think it's just cost. And time factor's probably a key thing, especially if you've got a family, got two kids and then to do that as well, it would just drive people crazy, to be fair. On the flip side, it's probably good because it gets the kids outside, creates a bit of a - but in the long term I don't know how sustainable something like that could be. But it's definitely something that we would encourage and advocate for because I think it's important." (S4)

"...growing your own food is the mental wellbeing, the physical wellbeing I suppose. Don't get me wrong, it's not necessarily cheaper, it can be expensive to grow your own stuff, especially if it fails, or if it rains like it did last year. For two or three years now I've barely been able to grow any peas because it's been too hot, they can't deal with it." (S5P8)

In the same vein, many of the stakeholders reiterated the challenges of maintaining allotments, and highlighted benefits of providing community-level growing opportunities:

"P2: We've had a big scandal in our village over allotments because the guys that owned the main plot for the allotments want to sell it and have basically forced out most of our allotment holders in one of the two sets of allotments in our village and people are very angry about it. But the reality is that for most people, a standard size allotment is way too big. So, I would like to see a lot more community gardens. We've been planting community orchards in our village, which will be a good few years before there is much on them and we've got to stop people breaking things and snapping the cherry trees, things like that. But for people to be able to work together on a garden without the fear that they've got to have a massive plot and eat gooseberries for 16 weeks in a row. To be able to redeploy and share and move things around, so that everyone could benefit from getting involved but nobody has to take all the hard work because growing your own food is hard work.

P3: I think that point is very, very well made. The garden size for a house - we are not going to change that sadly, but you are absolutely right. But I do think allotments and public space do have a huge part to play." (S2)

"Having community spaces that are growing food, almost like a community allotment where people chip in and then they get a portion of stuff. It's hard to police but if you've got the education with it then hopefully you wouldn't have to police so much. But like you say, if people were doing that. It brings people together, and allotments up the road from us did it. They had an open day, and they hadn't done it in ages, but they did it in September. It was lovely, they had a barbecue, and you could order some things. Somebody from a local creche, they were supplying the crayons and face paint for a nominal fee. All these things were just a nice, 'bringing people together'." (S5P8)

"I'd love to see more collaborative growing spaces, I think there's just not enough. I've got an allotment, and it's become a lot for me, to the point where I haven't been there for weeks and I'm at the point where I'm going to probably have to give it up. But I've put out adverts, made nice posters. I've said, 'Community, growing, would you like to be part of this? Maybe just can spare three or four hours a week', and no-one has contacted me." (S5P9)

Within that, one of the stakeholders highlighted the importance of 'fun' in community growing:

"And it needs to be fun; kids need to want to grow things. I remember when I was at school, we were forever growing cress on wet tissues and things like that. I don't know if kids still do that. But encouraging more growing stuff on windowsills, growing, growing things in public spaces." (S2P2)

One of the stakeholders highlighted the sense of community togetherness that can be achieved from community growing:

"I just thought I'd love to see more of people coming together and saying, 'Let's work together; let's grow some stuff together and we can all benefit from it'. But I think it's that sense of, like you were saying, community. We were talking about that this morning at work, there's very little of that community feel in our wherever we live." (S5P9)

Another stakeholder described how people may care more about food when they have contributed to growing it:

"If you've ever grown anything yourself, it just gives you that appreciation of the process that it takes to get involved in. You grow that food and if any of that goes to waste you feel it that bit more because you know the energy that you've had to put in to help it to grow." (S5P8)

Aside from community growing opportunities, one of the stakeholders highlighted that small-scale growing can be achieved even within the home:

"I know this isn't going to make much difference in the grander scheme of things - but even if you've got some rocket or lettuce growing on your windowsill, and pretty much everybody has windowsill, if everybody could be doing that, that's at least a couple of lettuce - or having something where you get pea shoots, you just get a load of pea seeds, you start them off and you chop them and then you've got them fresh right there. It's not lost its nutrients, it's not wrapped in plastic, it's right on your windowsill whenever you need it." (S5P8)

Theme 4: Commercial food production and logistics

The cost of food production

The catering stakeholder discussed a core challenge in relation to the high costs associated with food production:

"It [food production] should be cheaper, that would be great. Obviously, the growers, their cost is defined by the people who are charging them for the water, the gas, the electricity and it's all their fault basically! Growing food comes down to nature, it doesn't cost anything. It's only seed that costs us a lot of money, the rest of it is dictated by the weather or, depending on how you are growing it. Vertically, for instance, that you rely a lot on UV, which generates a lot of electricity. Eat Curious built their own solar farm to power their facilities. It's a very expensive process unfortunately when really it isn't. (S1)

Some of the stakeholders highlighted that this is particularly the case for local food production, which can disincentivise local food production and incentivise international food supplying:

"Finding local so that you can reduce those food miles. But then when it's so hard for small producers, that's where everything goes big and it has to go from further afield to get stuff." (S5P8)

"I also think that there must be some kind of government levies on the stuff that's produced locally. Why is it that we can get stuff from abroad and on the supermarket shelf cheaper than the stuff that was produced right here? That doesn't make sense. Don't you think they would be encouraging us to buy more locally produced things rather than some bananas coming from Costa Rica?" (S5P9)

Improving animal welfare

One of the stakeholders reflected on how farming should be focusing on improving animal welfare standards:

"I do think farm welfare, standards of how we treat animals - the way we treat each other should start with how we treat animals. A country that doesn't look after its animals is probably not going to look after its people because the animals don't get to choose to look after themselves." (S2P2)

Pressure in hospitality and food production

One of the stakeholders reflected on the financial and logistical pressures faced in hospitality, which can impact people's food-related decision-making:

"As an interesting point, the current pressure on hospitality in terms of payroll, national insurance, food inflation, what that's doing is meaning that the fast-food operators can introduce AI to reduce their costs but restaurants, serving people,

cooking fresh food, can't. So, we've actually got two sectors - one the fast food, which is going to increase because they are going to be able to do that, they've got the financial muscle, and fresh food is going to be really challenging." (S2P3)

In the following dialogue, the stakeholders reflect on numerous challenges related to food production, regarding the fragility of food producers in their relationships with retailers, and risks of food overproduction within these complexities:

P2: I worked for food producers and food ingredient producers for a very, very long time and it is very hard to make money in food in the UK. A lot of that, I'm sorry to say, is down to the power of the supermarkets. God bless the supermarkets, we probably have cheaper food than most countries in the world because of the power of our supermarkets, but that doesn't help if you are making the food. If you get to the end of the year and suddenly the buyer at Tesco puts his hand out and says, I want a 5% rebate on everything I've done with you this year and it's your choice if you want to carry on supplying or not'. There are some really shaky things that go on in food production and in order to meet the price targets of the retailers, you have to make in massive quantities or you have to be Waitrose, where people will pay more for tiny amounts of things that disappear off the shelf after six months because they don't sell enough of them. So, it's a really, really tough industry to be in. There's a court case going on at the moment, I think, where a farmer who grows brussels sprouts is suing Aldi because they cancelled his contract and he'd already planted his sprouts. I don't know the full details but it's a bit of a test case, I believe. We encourage farmers to over-commit sometimes to a particular retailer and then if they are let down, they really are very badly let down. For us in the Food Aid area, a lot of surplus comes about because retailers cannot bear to see an empty shelf. So, the retailer will say to a farmer or a food producer, 'I'm going to commit to between 18,000 and 30,000 units of whatever this is and I'm going to call off exactly how many I want a few days beforehand'. So that grower can't change the amount that they plant, they have to go for what the most likely amount is going to be plus a bit over just in case. Because if you fail to have enough strawberries on a sunny weekend when Tesco wants everybody eating strawberries and cream, they are not going to forgive you for letting them run out of stock. So, you have a system that has traditionally created over-production in order to avoid potentially upsetting a retailer. Now, if the public would go, 'I went to the shop and there were no strawberries, so I bought plums instead'-But we don't; we think we should be able to eat fresh strawberries, fresh raspberries all year round. And we don't care where they come from. And I'm sure in food service, catering, you have to have enough food available. And you can't know in advance how many vegetarians, how many people are going to go chicken and how many are going to go beef, so you always are going to over-cater to a certain degree.

P3: *To a certain degree. It is amazing how inconsistent those percentages are, it always amazes me. You are absolutely right; there is always a certain element - no shows and wastage and whatever. I do think we need to be very careful with how we play - the recent tax rises or potential tax implications on farms, the unintended consequences I think could be quite severe and I don't think that's been really thought through. I think the whole idea that the vegan movement I think is quite challenging for farming but ultimately sheep and cows actually do an awful lot for - I know cows, the emissions - but the way they look after the countryside, I just think that's an unintended consequence too. So, I think we are inhibiting the farmers potentially. I don't think that is going to help us as a society."* (S2)

Opportunities and threats in farming and agriculture

One of the stakeholders reflected on some challenges faced in farming. One of which was reflecting on how unstable and unpredictable income can be due to external factors such as the weather:

"The challenge with farming on a basic level is nearly all your income comes at one part of the year and very often then the rest of the year you are in debt, waiting for that income to come in. One change to the weather, one change to disease, one change to the price of some input and you can suddenly not make a profit at all, all year. And therefore, mental health in farming is a real challenge." (S3)

Building on from this, the education stakeholder highlighted that what choices are made in what is grown in farming is largely dependent on weather conditions:

"For us it's balancing - we grow feed for our animals or grow to sell produce and then get the money to buy feed for your animals. So, at the moment, we are always balancing that, what's to feed the animals and what's for commercial. We did try some beans. We tried peas last year as well and we had some interesting weather, squashed all the peas to the point when they were harvested, they weren't worth what they should have been, so we ended up feeding them all to the sheep and saving on the sheep feed. So, it's all those crazy decisions you have to make as a farmer, always based around weather. And that's our problem." (S3)

One of the challenges included the issues of growing and selling locally, and the desire to try to sell produce locally in order to reduce the supply chain and reduce food miles:

"Researcher: Do you use a lot of your meats as part of your catering?"

S3: It's interesting, we don't at the moment and very few education establishments do. I hate to say it but it's probably because of the price point. And actually, probably

because we are all involved with catering companies, it's very hard to sell your own beef and your own lamb to a catering company. I think there was an outcome that we could support that - we tend to sell our lamb and our sheep to market, typically in Leicestershire. But I think there is definitely something we could do around a local offer. I've had vague conversations with a couple of restaurants about almost coming and picking your produce from the farm and seeing it all the way through. People don't like that approach sometimes but it's reality and I think that would be quite good. Including Delapre Abbey, we've been talking to the guys there about, 'Do you want to come and actually choose one of calves this year, track its 18-month life with us, it's welfare and then put it on a plate?' Very local, so that's quite an interesting project potentially. I think food miles needs to be an absolutely focus and it frustrates me." (S3)

One of the challenges of growing and selling locally, is that meat production tends to occur all at the same time, making it challenging to offer meat supplies year-round locally:

"Great example of that is our beef production. We've got 60-70- cows that produce a calf a year, give or take. Now, because of the way we operate a farm, those calves all come about the same time, so they'll all come March-April. If we had a contract with a local restaurant that wanted to serve our beef, we would have to change our farm system in order to have a calf every few weeks so that we could supply all year round. We can't do that, it doesn't work in our system, it doesn't work in terms of our herd and calving. So that is restrictive to supplying local. Therefore, it becomes a bit niche, like the Delapre Abbey thing, which is just buy one a year off us, because they are not worried about having the same menu all year round, it's very seasonal, so that could work. But we couldn't supply a bigger chain from that point of view, which is a shame." (S3)

Despite these challenges, this stakeholder talked about their desire to start a local farm shop to sell various products created from their farm:

"The other thing that is really missing from here, I think, is a farm shop. So, in the future it may be that we do something around a café/farm shop. It might be that it's limited opening, it might be that we can sell some of our own produce in there. But I think that would be a really useful community project that potentially could come in the future. There are vague plans for it, which would come with some of that potential asset release, certain things like that. So, lots of ideas about that. At the moment we've obviously got the lamb and the beef. We've then got wheat and interestingly I had a conversation with the farm manager the other day about let's create some flour. So, we've got milling wheat, which we sell at the moment, and I think we could potentially produce our own flour we could then sell here. We've got oil seed rape, we could do cold pressed oils, which would be really good. I think we

could create beer, but that's an interesting one, because we've got barley and the wheat." (S3)

Building from this, the education stakeholder discussed their desire to explore vertical farming and the benefits this can have environmentally:

"I think we are also exploring the options of vertical farming. Not yet but I think if we could in the future then that would give us access to a whole load of green salad and herbs and those sorts of things, which again I think would be really great for the students to see as a business option. The challenge always is a supply chain if it's commercial. But if we are going to make it purely commercial events, yes, then it's how we get that to market. But it would always be an educational first and hopefully break even afterwards from that point of view, but that could be quite exciting. The irony is, in some respects vertical farming you do when you haven't got much space. We've got space but it's the future in terms of potentially high energy but free energy though solar into a system that is vertical farming could be something that we could probably do lots of really good stuff here that could help. So, I think that may be a project for the future." (S3)

Theme 5: Food economy and employment

Economic impacts of purchasing decisions and business viability

Some of the stakeholders had in depth discussions about the impacts the economy has on the rising costs of foods, the impacts this has on people's purchasing decisions, and the further impact this has on business success and viability:

"P5: You've got this shrinkage of the economy as well and an increase in costs. It's like, where is the solution here? Decision makers in London don't make it any easier. I think this afternoon we should be hearing about the budgets or something as well.

P6: I see product lines disappear because businesses have gone out of business, so they just completely disappear. Customer demand might be there for that product, but the company just can't sustain it. I can pick up a particular product, price of chocolate cacao. One company, it just can't cope because the price of cacao has trebled virtually. And they can't source it; we can't even source it at a reasonable price for customers to buy. Coffee has gone that way as well. Is price, availability, it's just high.

P5: If you look at the figures, especially over the last three or four months, and the number of business that have actually shut down or gone out of business, you will see the majority of them will be hospitality, the food area. So, all these things add

up and then you can't really shift that cost on to - there's a ceiling in terms of how much you can shift the cost onto the customer. Over the last five years you've probably got away with it but now there is no more room at the top to pass that cost on to the consumers because they just go, 'Actually, I don't want to shop with you anymore'." (S4)

Building on this, the stakeholders discuss how rapidly the economy shifts, and how the economic challenges most impact small businesses:

P5: Right now, in the current climate, as of 1st April with the higher national insurance contributions, who's going to take the beating? Straight away we are going to see a massive slide, like a drop off a cliff, in terms of hospitality sector. Restaurants will probably go through a massive impact on that as well. And also, over the last five years in terms of cost it has gone up by 20%. Previous to Covid it wasn't that much of [inaudible] there was a gradual increase. But after Covid there's been a 20% increase in terms of all the goods, so it's a bit of a challenging time really.

P6: I agree, it is and has been challenging. We haven't got the resources to smooth things out as much as large companies, perhaps. The increases in NI that's come in this month, that's going to have an effect with food prices.

P5: That's an overnight cost.

P6: Yes. As a company, as we are a co-operative we try and put people first. So far, we've got away with not having to make any redundancies or anything like that but we've just had to change our working patterns even though this year sales have been an increase compared to last year. But I've seen other businesses are now closing since Brexit times, Covid times - footfall [in a Northants shop] has dropped and they can't sustain the business. So it is tough.

P5: I think it's more of an impact on smaller businesses. We work with different towns as well and it's the smaller businesses are taking a massive impact because people are just holding back now. They don't really want to spend, and if they do end up spending they are probably going to somewhere where there's a bit more of a cluster of businesses which creates a bit more of an atmosphere." (S4)

Despite these challenges, one of the stakeholders highlighted that the food economy remains strong, while the wider economy is weak and results in many of the economic challenges described:

"I think the economy surrounding food is strong. It's just, I suppose, then the wider economy is quite weak at the moment and that's where we are seeing the issues. Population, the last population figures, we are still growing. Some countries are decreasing in population, but we've still got a positive birth rate. So, I think you are

going to naturally see consumption of food is going to increase as a result of the increase in population.” (S4P7)

Economy in frozen food sector is stable

One of the stakeholders described how job security is high in the frozen foods distribution sector as the food economy will always demand frozen foods:

“For me, just from my personal perspective, that food economy will always be there, we are always going to need to eat. People are always going to go to supermarkets to shop for food. Therefore, my sector is always going to be there, supporting that and making that happen. So, job opportunities are always there within that sector, and we are only seeing growth in it.” (S4P7)

Pay rates in NHS catering

In the catering sector, the stakeholder discussed the challenges within the NHS of needing highly skilled chefs to underpin their catering service, but the pay rates do not currently reflect the skill levels required for the service:

“NHS England released the food and drink national standards a couple of years ago, I think I was very new into this post. I think they have seven points as well, one of those of which is around about fair pay for skill, something that we are working on here at Northampton. But we are also tied by budgets. I would rewrite a job description or create a job description based on what the job role requires but also have a look at what the national standard for that is as well. A national standard for a catering manager is probably going to be anywhere between £28,000-£35,000 a year. I don't think that's enough personally, especially if you want someone to be as skilled as I would like them to be and have the qualifications that I would want them to have. So, we really do struggle because I think that the job description that I would like to put out there, my ideal would be the overqualified, and those people who are overqualified aren't going to be taken a lower paid job. Even for chefs, if you study at college for four years and you've got ten years' experience in some great locations and you are looking for a chef's position, you are not going to come and work at the hospital for £24,000 a year as a skilled chef. That's what we face at the moment. We have banding in the NHS, so you have to aim high. There is a format that we use to put certain wording or certain lines in there which would relate to it, but you are basically paying for a skill, you are not paying for a person. That's the only thing that we struggle with here. trying to put that into words and get what we need out of that as well.” (S1)

Mental health and welfare in farming and catering

The education stakeholder reflected on how certain courses are seeing a decline in students because of the high demands some jobs and sectors entail, for example, bakery and farming:

"We are about providing skills, a pipeline of people for the future that have got the skills to be employable, including the food sector. We are working very closely on apprenticeships in bakery, which is really great initiative. I think there's more we could do there, particularly on a short course because they are desperate for people, bakeries are, they've a skilled shortage in terms of bakers. It's a tough job - early mornings, very busy job, I think, from that point of view, but it's a crucial job. So, we've got some good links with really good employers around that. We're running the commis chef course at the moment. I think where we are producing the future agriculture students we are very much focussed on, 'You are the food producers of the future.' However, we haven't got as many students as we used to have for agriculture and you can see why. Why would someone go into farming at the moment? And the government don't seem to want to support them, they don't see the future in farming. People are diversifying their farms and making far more money on it. I think the young generation - you can see it, they are struggling with what the traditional farming job looked like." (S3)

Building from that, the education stakeholder reflected on the poor mental health conditions for people in the farming sector:

"Mental health in farming is a real challenge. There's a great organisation called Yellow Wellies, which is part of the NFU, supporting farmers with mental health and injuries and those sorts of things and trying to make it safe. We work closely with them, they come in and do sessions with our students on their own futures, their mental health. But also, I'm pretty sure the latest statistics are farming and similar industries, it's seven times the most dangerous industry to work in compared with the next one, which is construction. That's cutting corners, people trying to do the job of two people in one, not having safe equipment. The fact that farms are open to family, real worry because a construction site, couldn't get anywhere near it but anyone can walk onto a farm. I think across the board there's a massive issue. I think rural communities, and farming in particular, there's a separate issue. Young farmers in particular are doing a lot now on not creating just parties that people go to, to meet each other, but actually they are now looking at what can they do to support mental health long term, because it is a real challenge. Various other organisations got involved in that. What we are trying to do with our students is encourage them to talk about it. I think the farming community in particular has

always been a bit 'get on with it, toughen up'. It's a tough job, if you've got animals you've got to get up every morning at 6am. You can't have a holiday, there's no break from it, those animals need sorting out every day of the year. It's relentless and I think a lot of people struggle with that. So, I think it's about talking about, it's about looking at what you can do, it's about systems that help. Yes, it's a tough gig." (S3)

Theme 6: Catering and procurement

Cost implications in catering and procurement

One of the stakeholders described the role of profit and 'best offers' in catering and procurement decisions:

"Personally, my views on that would be that when you are talking catering, and especially procurement, there's an element of cost management within there. Catering, that's providing a service, and they are going to be a business doing that, they are going to be making money. So, I think they are quite profit driven, procurement would definitely be as well, they are trying to get the best price and availability for stuff. So, I think they are quite money focussed. We've discussed the challenges elsewhere with that so I think any meaningful food plan needs to consider how aggressive they are going to be chasing that, if that makes sense." (S4P7)

In earlier themes, stakeholders reflected on how the economy results in rising costs of food. In the following discussion, stakeholders notice how visibly the costs of food is rising via restaurants and fast-food outlets, and how this results in changes in purchasing decisions:

"P6: It just occurred to me, went to Indian the restaurant, we could quite easily between the three of us spend £100 or so, but not so long ago it was less than half that. You just see the price of just eating out. We certainly now, as a family, don't do that much these days, it's just too expensive."

P5: I had a KFC the other day, it was £10 for a KFC. I was like, 'Is this a joke? £10 for a kids meal? Wow, this is incredible'. I had took my niece and nephew, 'Let's just pick something up', I would say a cheap meal. Walked away with a £40 bill and I thought, 'That can't be KFC right? It's almost the same as a Nando's, or a little bit more."

P7: If something is the same price it's smaller, isn't it, so you get less of it."

P5: Yes, that's just one person now. I was shocked, I've just paid a Nando's bill in a KFC. We were literally passing by and thought, 'Shall we just pick something up because we don't want to go to the other side of town'. And I was like, 'What?'

incredible. But I think from a procurement point of view it's only going to get tougher. It's not going to get better from my point of view. I come from a commercial background a bit so I can just see this getting tougher for people. The biggest thing I tell people is every year gets tougher but every year you have to get wiser. That's just how you look at it now." (S4)

Local supply chains

The stakeholder working in wholefood retail described their ambitions to prioritise working with local food suppliers wherever this is possible to achieve:

"We emphasis firstly local if we can get that product, organic, Fairtrade and so forth, but our products come from all over the world. We don't import directly, probably because we are not big enough to and, of course, the paperwork since Brexit has got a lot more difficult. I know some of our wholesalers who do actually export to Europe as well have found that a great difficulty. But yes, if we can get it locally and it's a good product, we will stock it. But obviously the Chilian raisins, we can't grow those local." (S4P6)

Similar to these views, the catering stakeholder reflected on how it is their responsibility to know about and form good partnerships with local food suppliers, and maximise the benefits and impacts of those good partnerships through collaboration:

"I'm a chef-it's just my job to know about these things. Eat Curious, they produce an amazing product; it's meat free. I work with them quite closely. They come in and they've done a couple of production days for us where they will show us how to use their product to the best way we can. It's more sustainable, it's got a lot of carbon-positive attributes and it's a really good product to use, better than the likes of Quorn. And for it to be on my doorstep is brilliant. We can go direct to Eat Curious or we can go through our suppliers, and generally one of the team from Eat Curious will deliver it to us, so we've got that nice relationship with them." (S1)

Within these discussions, the catering stakeholder provided rich insights into the immediate and wider benefits and challenges of nurturing relationships with local food suppliers, such as supporting the wider psychosocial benefits of some local suppliers as a strength, and also changes of breakages to the supply chain as a challenge:

"We use quite a lot of big providers, and we have to use those because of the volumes of food that we order in. But we are quite lucky that we have some really local businesses that we already work with. And I think that if you live in Northampton

and you know Northampton well, there are a couple of people that we do use who everybody knows. So, Gallone's, for instance, we use Gallone's because it's a massive ice cream company, it would be silly to not use them. Unfortunately, at the minute they are going through a bit of a changeover, so we are having a break until they get things working again. I think it's important to make sure that we do help our local community. Our fruit and veg suppliers are in Moulton Park. We also use a charitable organisation for our bread on site, they are called the Good Loaf. They help people with mental disorders or people who have come out of prison to rehabilitate them. And if it wasn't for us supporting those by buying the products that they make, they might not be there to support those people. So it's really important that we take on as many people as we can." (S1)

Building on their reflections, the catering stakeholder highlighted the importance of trusting the local food supply partnerships and having shared values, ethos and goals within that relationship:

"We rely on our suppliers to make responsible choices or ethical choices where they get their produce from. Our fruit and veg suppliers are very good with that, they will only purchase from overseas when they necessarily have to. Strawberries for instance, you are not going to get many of them in the country at the moment so we wouldn't purchase them until June. It is difficult because the people that we use or the customers that we have, we have to make sure that they meet certain standards and criteria for us to use them. So, if our fruit and veg suppliers can take that legwork away from us, and if they want to work with those people, then that's brilliant. Soil Association and having our Food for Life certification is really important to us this year. We had it in the past but that was prior to me starting here so it's something I'm pushing for. And that points you to local producers having a certain percentage of food which is organic within your menus; making sure you are using MSC certified fish products, British beef or British meat. So, it's not that we are not doing that already, it's just that on paper we are doing it, we just want to be credited for it. So that pushes us down that way of using local produce as we can, depending on if our suppliers are purchasing it. We can always ask that of them, and generally our fruit and veg suppliers are really good. If I turned up on their doorstep and said, 'I want this', they would be like 'Okay, we'll find it'." (S1)

However, one of the stakeholders highlighted some struggles related to supporting the public to buy local, healthy, and sustainable produce, and suggested services such as these require subsidies to redirect public shopping decisions to be more inclined to shop in stores such as these:

"I think if things were a bit more localised then that would help with employment opportunities. But again, you are talking about a huge societal shift because you need people to see the worth in that and where things are getting very automated."

Subsidies - I was at an event a year or so ago where there was a business minister at the time. I was asking the question of, 'You're saying you want people to do the right thing, so why isn't the right thing subsidised so it's easier?' For instance, my business is all about environmental practices, good for the communities, all the rest of it, but I can't afford to feed myself. No-one is going to be incentivised to do the right thing if it's really hard and really expensive to do the right thing, so looking at subsidies. You are talking about food economy and employment, subsidising or having that support there so people are incentivised to have programmes locally where they are employed, like you are doing." (S5P8)

Strong teamwork and leadership drives positive, impactful, and sustainable change

The catering stakeholder highlighted that one of the main drivers in being able to make positive, sustainable and impactful change within the catering sector, is being passionate and being willing to be assertive in insisting on positive action to drive change, as well as having a good rationale for implementing the changes. Their quote here discusses this in relation to the importance of, and rationale for, new catering equipment for more environmentally friendly and logistically efficient food preparation and cooking practices:

"I'm very persistent. More than anything, I think that you have to be persistent, you have to ask for things. Our counterpart over at Kettering, they do an amazing job over there and they are very much the same as us, they are very old in terms of their equipment and things like that but are just really pushed, trying to get the best equipment for the team, something that's more efficient, something that's easier to use. We make 2,000 meals a day here for patients. Obviously cooking on steam isn't appropriate anymore. Twenty years ago it was probably the up-and-coming thing but nowadays we want to make sure that not only are we preparing really nice food, but we can do it quickly and efficiently. We reduced our cooking times here by about four hours a day just on one dish. So, we are just focussed on what's right really, not just for the hospital but for the employees who are using the equipment and things like that. I feel if you do all the planning correctly and you've got a legitimate reason behind you to do it, there is no reason why they should say no. We are all here for patients and the community at the end of the day, nothing that we can do is wrong. So - yes, I just have to be persistent and prepared." (S1)

In addition to their own personal drive for positive change, the catering stakeholder highlighted that another factor supporting positive change is in having support from those in leadership positions who can approve and back suggested changes:

"It does help to have a really good Facilities Director. He's been really on board and focussed with the catering for the past three years. Completely understood where we were in terms of progression for what we want to achieve here and has really backed anything that I've put forward so far, which has been amazing. I feel like my time is coming to an end shortly though because you can only ask for so much and I think he's given a lot to us. There are a couple more projects that I'd really like to work on, but he's definitely given a lot to us over the last three years, which has been fantastic because we wouldn't be able to move into the next phase really." (S1)

In addition to supportive leadership, the stakeholder discussed what an important asset it is to have staff in charge of procurement in their food and catering plans. This role enables them to forecast and better plan their food costs and food offer:

"I'm very fortunate to have a Procurement Manager and he looks after our contracts. We use a procurement company called Avendra and the Procurement Manager looks after my account. He will send me an update on market reports or what they see as a company in, say, a month's time or two months' time, where they are going to see a massive spike in certain products. At the minute coffee - ridiculous; potatoes, ridiculous. So we are quite lucky, in a way, that we've got someone who's looking after us and telling us what's going to be more expensive - cauliflowers, for instance." (S1)

In addition to supportive leadership and the relevance of a procurement manager in driving meaningful change in catering, the catering stakeholder highlighted that they have had opportunity to expand their catering team. This has enabled them to build and grow their services and remit offered within hospital catering:

"Most recently we've employed two new managers who've taken some of the burden away from me. So, whereas I was running all of these departments by myself with the help of my supervisory team when I first started here, I knew what I had as a vision and how I wanted to work. It's taken two years, but we've got a couple of managers in, one now manages the restaurant, which is like a million-pound business now, and we've got someone who helps me manage the patient catering side of things. Two massive, different operations. I'm now getting to the point where I want to work on the things that I've been wanting to work on for the last couple of years. We've got a new dietitian starting this week, so we are going to start focussing on patient menus and how we can change that in line with our digital meal ordering. There's just always loads of things that are coming around, which is good. And now I get to be in the driving seat again and start pushing things forward, which is really good."

In addition, growing team capacity has enabled them to provide a 24-hour catering service for their patients. This was particularly helpful when supporting the cultural needs of their patients:

"We've got enough team now to open 24 hours a day for all of our staff and visitors. And especially during Ramadan that's quite important, to give people access to that food and drink." (S1)

Food policy and regulations in catering

One of the core factors influencing decision-making in hospital catering sector relates to nutritional and health and safety regulations that need to be considered. The catering stakeholder highlighted that catering for hospital patients is highly governed by relevant nutritional and catering standards:

"Patient catering is obviously a lot different. There are certain standards that we do have to meet, and there are a lot. At the moment I'm going through that. We have the BDA, the British Dietetics Association. Not that they govern what we do but obviously they set targets for nutritional values within a meal, and that's something that I'm really keen to get right this time around." (S1)

Similarly, there are various health and safety regulations, such as the rules around heating and cooling practices of food they have prepared:

"There are lots of rules around that in terms of food safety. Obviously, we can't reheat more than once. We are a cook-chill operation, so what the guys cook today, that gets blast chilled within 90 minutes to stay within our food safety parameters and then once it's chilled it goes up to our kitchen and it gets plated up there. We use a regeneration method here so all of our plated meals get put into a box trolley and that will go to one of our regen units. And then it sits on refrigeration until the timer clicks on and then it will go through a heating process, ready to serve the patients. So, there is a lot of food safety involved in our operation as well, just to make sure that we are not going to poison anybody."

Food preferences and familiarity

Another factor which is important to consider in catering relates to food preferences. The catering stakeholder reflected on the need to be aware of the challenges of offering foods that their patient community will be familiar to and have preferences

for; this can affect patient uptake and consumption of the foods offered in hospital catering:

"I can imagine the insecurities our patients would have, or face, would be that the food options that they have doesn't really fit their diet or their preferences. We do a couple of surveys a year and for some reason steak is always on the menu, is always one that comes back, 'I want steak'. Okay, that's great [laughter]. It's going to be a very thin piece of steak because of my budget. I think the insecurity for the patients is it's not what they would typically eat, I suppose. And because of how we cook, it's very difficult at the moment to say we can cook for everybody." (S1)

However, a good practice implemented by hospital catering is how they try to codesign their menus with relevant stakeholders of the hospital, particularly patients:

"We don't necessarily just want to build a menu and go, 'This is what we are going to do, like it or lump it'. We'll create a focus group within the hospital, we'll have people from the clinical team, we'll have volunteers, we'll have patients and visitors involved. Just try to get a lot of people involved so that when we do come to change the menu, everybody has had a really good insight into what we are trying to do. It's very difficult to achieve when there are so many different people sitting around the table but it's important to make sure that we are meeting patients' needs. There's something somewhere they say, 'food is medicine,' and it is. We need to feed people; we need to make sure that the people who are here are getting the right nutrition. If it makes them better and it makes them leave sooner, then we are doing the right thing, aren't we?" (S1)

Building procurement policy to support local supply

In an earlier theme, the education stakeholder reflected on their desire to grow and sell their produce locally in order to reduce supply chains and food miles. Building on this, they discussed the importance of building more procurement policy to aid this process:

"I think as a large organisation, large employer, we are always thinking about when we procure anything let's how much value do we put on that it has to be local. That covers everything from IT services, financial services, consultants, but equally the food. Procurement is very important to us from that point of view and I would love it if there was some policy around that from that point of view because I know it would really help. But equally local businesses have to understand price point as well and be competitive." (S3)

Theme 7: Food waste and sustainability

Responsibilities in food waste and sustainability

The catering stakeholder had numerous reflections related to responsibilities in catering around food waste and sustainability. This was important to them because food waste in hospitals is high due to the variable appetites and food needs of people who are unwell in hospital:

"It's [food waste] literally one of the things that we live and breathe here at the moment because we generate a lot of waste. That's partly because we can't control how much people eat. People who are here, they are here for a reason. They are unwell, and I think you probably find it yourself, that if you are not well you generally don't eat. And I'm exactly the same. But the types of people that we have here, and especially specific age groups, they tend not to eat a lot. And because of the cooking processes that we have in place in terms of our regeneration, we have to put a certain amount of the food on the plate for it to be reheated. So, we are working at the moment how we can produce smaller meals to prevent food wastage from patients' plates. But it's a really difficult area. We can work on production, because that's us. We can work on our wastage, but what comes back from the wards is a difficult one."
(S1)

Another stakeholder described their own organisational responsibility as a wholefoods retailer to identify the food waste and sustainability values of their suppliers to ensure their values align with one another in their responsibility to reduce food waste and ensure sustainability:

"We don't deal with the supermarkets so I can't quote exactly, but one of our main suppliers, they've got a quite comprehensive sustainability plan and published themselves of that. I quite well trust them that they actually are delivering on that plan, and they do their best to reduce food waste. But it's giving it away to food bank or community shops, which we haven't mentioned, there are a number of community shops are around, which does help. So yes, we don't deal with supermarkets but our suppliers that we try and trade with, we look at them and see how they are performing in the sector to sustainability." (S4P6)

Balancing food waste and sustainability against other priorities

One of the stakeholders reflected on the meaning of sustainability, and highlighted that sustainability includes a combination of sustainability practices, including environmental sustainability as well as social and financial sustainability:

"I Chair the Landex sustainable farm network, which is an organisation that's using all of the college farms as demonstrator farms and looking at sustainability. The first meeting was, 'What do we mean by sustainability?' Everybody focussed on it needs to be sustainable in terms of the environment but equally sustainable in terms of the price point, money. And sustainable in terms of that social value as well, from that point of view." (S3)

Another stakeholder echoed these sentiments, highlighting that social and financial considerations are important in food waste:

"I think food waste, especially in the industry I'm in, it's something that there is definitely a focus there. How do we reduce it, how do we get social benefit? But then also a financial element as well. So that is something that is definitely a focus." (S4P5)

Within that, one of the stakeholders reflected on the importance of establishing the right balance in farming between making profit and doing things in ways that are good for the environment, and discussed some opportunities to practice in pro-environmental ways:

"The nature emergency is key. Farming has to stand up and say some of the practices it used in the past have damaged nature, I think that's absolutely fair. Equally farmers are very well placed to be the ones that can solve some of those challenges but not to the detriment of them having a profitable business. That's where the conflict is at the moment from that point of view. This whole real focus on rewilding is an interesting concept when you think what is rewilding? If farmers end up just growing nature, we'll have no food. So there needs to be a balance there between regen farming, carbon capture, creating biodiversity, green energy and, at the same time producing a decent product that is healthy and therefore is- I think you've probably got different answers from different people on that one, depending on what system is. A good example is solar is obviously a big thing at the moment, green energy, but lots of farmers don't want solar over their land because then they can't farm it. We are looking at a system that is agri-solar which it will mean that we can produce less solar from a piece of land because they will be wider apart, but we can still farm in between it. So actually, a piece of land and then we'll do some research on how does that impact you yield of your wheat but equally what does that do from a clean energy point of view and how does that help? So, there are definitely things that we can do to support the environment from that point of view. I think where lots of farmers have relied on subsidies and incentives in the past, that's changing all the time, which drives behaviours. Some are positive, some are not so much, but I think they are always well meaning. But if suddenly a farmer feels they can get more money from growing wildflowers rather than food, where does that end? I think they have got to be incentivised in the right way from that point of view. It's a challenging sector to make a profit in, it's really tough." (S3)

Strategies to manage food waste and sustainability

1. Reducing costs and giving away food that is reaching the end of its shelf life

One of the stakeholders working in retail described how they provide significant reductions on items reaching the end of their shelf life in order to reduce food waste:

"Luckily, we don't see an enormous amount. We hopefully can always spot things that are going closed to their sell by or best before date and sell them off as cheap as we can - a packet of pasta for 10p if it's a day or two there. So yes, we really try very hard to keep waste to a minimum." (S4P6)

Similarly, many of the stakeholders reflected on how one of the main supermarkets is giving food away for free when it is reaching the end of its shelf life:

"I see one of the supermarkets is now effectively giving away food for free if it's coming out of date at the end of the day. I think they are putting zero price labels on it. I think it has to go through the till but it's zero. So, you can pick it up and go to the till with it and scan it and it says nothing to pay. I can't remember who it was, I saw it on something the other day. They were saying rather than chuck it away we are just going to put it on the shelf with zero price tickets on. Great." (S3)

"P5: I don't know who it is but basically they have an area within where we are, and a lot of the discounted products go there. But I think they've started this format were if it's literally at the end, I think they've started to give it away rather than let it go to waste. I think there's a logistics cost to send it back-

P7: There would be, yes.

P5: So, I think it's easier just to then [give it away]. It was actually Tesco who were doing that trialling with the Tesco Express stores. We've got a Tesco next to us, they've just trialled something where they started giving out the free food in stores. ITV have done a report on it but I don't know too much about it. It was just something I think, because she was passing by there and she saw people picking free stuff up and that's when it clicked they were doing it this way." (S4)

Building on this, one of the stakeholders described how this initiative of free purchasing is evident in smaller 'express' supermarket chains, and how this initiative should be replicated in the larger supermarket chains:

"I think it's the responsibility of the bigger businesses like Sainsburys and Tesco to drive that thing. If I refer back to the pilot study that Tesco are doing with the Express stores. I think it's a good model to replicate to a lot of larger superstores because

from a household point of view we are quite conscious in terms of that waste, we don't want to waste that food. We will always use something and try and recycle in some sense, whatever you cook. But from a supermarket point of view, if that product doesn't get used there's a logistic cost to them to send it back. And obviously if some of the goods are frozen foods, by the time you send them back there could be the waste, it has to be written off. So, by giving it away, I think there's a much better value add, especially in these circumstances. I think the fact that they are doing the pilot studies with Tesco Express shows that they are thinking in the right way, doing the right thing. It's just the speed of it needs to be scaled up quite quickly." (S4P5)

That stakeholder highlighted that more examples of free purchasing and food redirection needs to take place in order to reduce food waste:

"I guess from my personal point, I think more needs to be done in terms of breaking those barriers down, especially with the supermarkets, what's happening with all that. So, expiry date products, don't really know what the current...It's quite scary in terms of how much food is left over when you go into the supermarkets and you see it, it's perfectly fine and it's going to get thrown away. I've got this little Tesco Extra near where I live and I asked them, 'What do you do with this, because this is tons of food'. And they said, 'Actually, we give it away to homeless charity'. That's incredible. When I asked different businesses, I don't think many businesses do that, I'm not too sure how frequent it is. I think it just depends on who's running the store or the operations." (S4P5)

Further explaining the importance of free purchasing and food redirection, one of the stakeholders highlighted the importance of government action to make it simpler for organisations to enact these strategies:

"When you've got supermarkets and they are chucking away shed loads of food, that's ridiculous. I know from Brixworth, there are maybe some more partnerships, but it needs to be illegal to throw away good food. Instead of it being illegal that you can't go into the trucks to get it - We've got a One Stop at the end of our road and someone was saying, 'We are legally not allowed to give this stuff away, but if I accidentally pout this thing there and then turn around,' because otherwise if you are chucking it in the bin and that is utter lunacy. No, it's probably not going to be the most nutritious food but when you've got the difference between people starving, who have two incomes in their home, and people not, then that's utter lunacy. That needs to be something that enough of, 'It's only our local council'. Well, it's only all of the local councils putting pressure on central government and saying, 'This is ridiculous, we need to put something in place' So that it's not just, 'Sometimes Tesco and Co-Op give us some stuff', it's you have to. Legally, by law, you are chucking this out - I just can't understand it." (S5P8)

2. Redistribution

The stakeholders discussed a number of strategies they implement to drive down food waste. One of the stakeholders described the role of FareShare in redistributing food waste to other people and organisations:

"I know many distribution centres, I've worked at one previously in Milton Keynes, they worked with a company called FareShare where any surplus products that get delivered into the depots that would then go on to the stores, any surplus there, they would contact FareShare. FareShare would arrange to pick it up and then distribute it out. Then also if FareShare, because sometimes they can't take certain things, they had facilities on that particular site to sell the products at a reduced rate to the colleagues and staff. That money would then go to charity of some sort." (S4P5)

Another stakeholder describes how food that is not fit for human consumption can be redistributed for animal feed:

"And not really related to human consumption of food, but certain waste will get made into animal feed, for example, or into biogas as well that's then used for fuel. So not all of it is just in landfill." (S4P7)

Building on this, the stakeholder described how food waste in the frozen food distribution centre is fairly minimal, but when it happens, there are processes in place to enable the waste that is not fit for human consumption to be redistributed for animal feed:

"In my particular warehouse it's there's not a lot at all because it's frozen. If something falls over or something like that, it's not a damage because it's rock solid. The only waste we will see is where a truck has malfunctioned on its way either to depot or from depot and then unfortunately, because of the nature of the product, that would be waste because that's not fit for human consumption if, say, it's frozen chicken that becomes warm. So, we do see that; we don't see that very often, which is really good. There are a lot of measures in place to stop that from happening. We have a central site that delivers to the stores and then the stores will load that delivery back up with the waste from the store. That will go back to a particular site that empties it there and they will distribute it to - bread waste goes to the animal feed and food waste will go to the compactor and plastic and cardboard get recycled. So that process exists to separate that." (S4P7)

3. Freezing food

The education stakeholder also reflected on how they manage food waste in their student catering, highlighting some positive practices to keep food waste to a minimum:

"Because we do our own catering on site, our chef is very good at minimising waste, freezing, doing all that sort of thing, which is great. To the point where we are getting better till systems that mean each portion is now measured in terms of its contents and what that means from a stock point of view. Whereas in the past that was all a bit - yes, guesswork. I think there are loads of policies, I think it's all based around food hygiene and all those things as well, which they are very good at. I'm not sure, but I think sometimes the students, particularly our residential students, can recognise, 'We had this for lunch a few days ago'. Yes, but it absolutely wouldn't have been frozen unless we could. So, I think they do try and minimise it as much as possible. And packaging as well, trying to minimise that." (S3)

4. Preserving food

Another strategy to reduce food waste described by one of the stakeholders is that of food preservation practices:

"How many people can stuff or pickle stuff or find a way of preserving it, dehydrate it. That's a bit more common now with air fryers, doing everything. We've got a Bramley apple tree, and it's so bit that we can't actually pick it, it's windfall. So, you grab as much as you can, you stuff them in hessian bags; hessian bags will preserve your apples and potatoes for months. I don't know what magic it is but it's great. hose little tips that you probably share on allotments - but then the rest of it you cook down into a purée and then you are shoving that in your porridge or yoghurt or whatever it is." (S5P8)

5. Communal composting

A food waste management strategy which links to community food and growing, is that of providing communal composting opportunities to the public:

"Not everybody has got a garden, I get it, but again if we had these communal spaces where we had communal compost and it didn't matter what food went in there, like one of those bokashi bins, then whatever food is going in there, it's all good." (S5P8)

6. Reducing packaging

One of the stakeholders described the importance of working towards packaging reductions in the overall waste reduction agenda:

"Also, the problem is - one of my things - local, the plastic packaging, getting rid of that. It's not okay, it's not good, it's not sustainable." (S5P8)

7. Portion-size choosing

In hospitals, one way food waste is managed is by enabling patients to choose from a varied menu and allow them to self-select their portion size preference:

"On all of our menus there's a tick box option so you can opt for a smaller plate. One of the things that we did last year was off the back of an NHS England project. They used different coloured plates and what it showed is that people were encouraged to eat more off a different colour. They found that a cornflower blue plate was the best, so we made a purchase on those and took those on. We now use them as part of our food service. It has had an effect in some areas but not in others. But I think that's just down to the demographic." (S1)

8. Monitoring food waste

In another example, the catering stakeholder discussed the positive impacts that monitoring food waste (both kitchen waste and especially plate waste) has had in reducing the volume of food waste:

"When I first started here, they tracked waste but not as well as I would like them to. Obviously, it's a requirement from the government that we have to track our waste. We have something called an ERIC Report. As part of that report, we have to track four waste streams within our service and that's quite difficult to do on paper. I have six Excel sheets that are tracking all this in different waste. Unfortunately, I already used a provider in our previous role which worked really well in our kitchens. So, effectively it's a tablet and it's connected to a set of scales. We put one in the kitchen and the teams measure all their wastage. So, if that's trim waste, if it's production waste, if it's plate waste, we can see where all of our high-volume areas are, whereas before we couldn't really track that. So, we know after the first, say, eight weeks of a new menu you can see a trend so you'd be able to tell what sells and what doesn't and then they can go back and change that. Since we put the equipment in for them to use to track their wastage, their wastage has probably gone down by 70%. And it was silly things like overcooking in the mornings for breakfast, we were seeing at the end of the breakfast shift they were throwing away so much. They'd got so used to

just putting it in the bin and walking away from it, they'd just forget. So now we generate a report from our software and we can see exactly what they've been throwing away because when you weigh it on the tablet there's a variety of different buttons so if it's bacon you can press 'bacon', sausages 'sausages'. So, at the end of the week, we can see how much they've thrown away and we can go back to them and go, 'Look, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday you were wasting a lot of food'. It could be a culprit, I'm not going to say it's a certain person or not, but you know who's working the morning shift. You can go to them and go, 'This is ridiculous, you are over cooking, just calm down'." (S1)

9. Using 'inedible' parts of produce

Alongside monitoring food waste, the stakeholder discussed ways they work with experts to maximise the full capacity (and cost) of vegetables rather than wasting parts of the vegetable that are usually discarded:

"£3 for a cauliflower - Yes, it was awful last year. I don't know whether it was due to the weather. What you will tend to find, especially with cauliflowers, they come as a head, but they come with a lot of leaf. So, the edible part that you would normally eat, that nice little white fluffy floret in the middle, was small but you were also charged for what's around the edge as well, and you have got to chop all of that off and throw it in the bin. We had a cumin cauliflower steak on, it was a really lovely dish, but it just wasn't cost effective for us. And things like that, you can't really use too much of that waste, I suppose. You don't really just want to throw all that in the bin, you are just getting £2 and lobbing it away because you are only getting £1 worth of cauliflower. The NHS Chef of the Year, there were a couple of guys - last year or the year before - they focussed on food waste. Food waste is one of the places where the entries were focussed on, and they used a cauliflower like that, and used every part of the cauliflower. So, they used the leaves, they used the stems; they were pickling it, they were poaching it, they were barbecuing it. And they literally had zero waste from a cauliflower. But you've got to have those kinds of people in your kitchen in the first place that can utilise all those skills. And they need the time to do that as well. If you've got 100 cauliflowers and you are trying to do that with all your cauliflowers, that's a lot of work." (S1)

10. Using better energy sources

In addition, the catering stakeholder discussed some changes they have made to drive more sustainable practices in food preparation and cooking. For example, using

different types of energy to prepare food (electric instead of gas) and having new appliances to enable this and to reduce cooking times:

"From a sustainability point of view, when I first started here, the chefs used to cook on steam, believe it or not; they had these big steam kettles that they would cook in. We've removed all of those, we've gone over to a different method of cooking - same method of cooking but different energy, we now use electric. We most recently finished off our second phase in our production kitchen. We've completely removed all gas now so it's just fully electric, really good appliances. Obviously, they are more efficient because they are brand new; they have reduced cooking times, they don't stay on all day. So we have taken some really good strides in that area." (S1)

11. Newer equipment

The catering stakeholder further reflected on the drive to replace old equipment to new equipment in order to increase the sustainability and cost effectiveness of their food preparation and cooking practices:

"We have replaced a lot of equipment in terms of washing machines, dishwashers, so we use the huge, huge - flight machines, they are called. They are about 6 metres long. You fill one end, and it just comes out clean the other end. But it's like on a really long conveyor belt. The ones that we had here when I first started were rotting, they were falling apart. So now we have a more sustainable machinery that uses less water, they are more clever. Anything that you put into a kitchen environment at the moment, especially now, it's got to be more sustainable, it's going to have better built-in computers, everything has got a computer built into it now. So, we've seen a lot of positive changes over the past three years. Really just getting rid of all of the old equipment that isn't really working correctly, spending loads of money on maintenance fees and things like that. We've just got to a point now where pretty much everything has been replaced. We are working on some really good projects for the new financial year to replace some more old equipment so we are more efficient and we're not just blowing out carbon emissions everywhere because we can turn things of now." (S1)

Strategies towards sustainability in farming

The education stakeholder reflected on positive developments in farming in relation to sustainability, as farms are increasingly incorporating carbon emissions measuring and reporting into their daily practice:

"I think the biggest challenge, as we said, is always about supply chain. I think there are lots of myths and misconceptions about methane and cows and all those sorts of things. I get that, absolutely, but there is lots that farms are doing to capture carbon and I think we are all getting far better at measuring and reporting that. How accurate that is, is debatable still but we've done a fantastic piece of work here on our soil. We've increased that hugely in the last year, purely from having cover crops and doing those sorts of things and being very sensitive to how we are managing the land - ploughing and all those sorts of things, which I think people are opening their eyes to now. The regen farming methods are meaning there are far less inputs. They can leave cows outside all year, which is actually creating a very different farm system, less input but the price point is the same, it's more intensive for the actual farmer because it's harder work. So there's that balance as well, which I think is interesting." (S3)

Building on this, the stakeholder discussed how carbon emissions will become increasingly important and that artificial intelligence will begin to feature within these practices:

"It's becoming an absolute - it will become a responsibility, more and more. Carbon accounting is going to become something that every farm has - You have to do it anyway, but I think it's going to be far stricter, and I think it will feed into grants and schemes and all those things that will mean we have to do that. There are lots of different ways of doing it. I think AI technology, drones, etc, is really enhancing some of that as well." (S3)

Focus on small to medium size businesses

During one of the focus groups, the stakeholders had detailed discussions about the importance of medium-sized businesses being supported to contribute to food waste reduction:

P7: I think the focus is on individuals, but I think the majority of the food waste is going to be from the minority, the large companies. I believe that's where the focus should be, rather than trying to target individuals with your food waste at household level. I think it should really be the larger businesses the focus is on and how they need to take responsibility in tackling that. Where we can engage with local charities to donate the stock, we do. Where to counteract food waste, if it's not for human consumption then it's doing something with it as well, yes. I think we do well there. Maybe the big businesses do, like Sainsburys obviously, a big brand, big name. But the medium to small, maybe they don't because the social impacts are not there, the attention isn't there. So maybe there's an opportunity there, however that looks, in

trying to get them to engage in that, I'm not sure; local restaurants, small to medium market chains, that sort of stuff.

P5: I think if you tell a small business what to do and something goes sideways, there's just too much of a risk. From a [inaudible] point of view, they might suggest certain things but nothing from a concrete [inaudible], that would be too much of a risk for them to go down that route. But maybe they might share something, as long as there's something in best practice, things like that.

P7: Yes, from a food waste point of view, I'm not sure. Maybe an example would be a local restaurant next door to a Sainsbury's store, and they say, 'We've got loads of bread waste, can you take it because we know that you turn it into animal feed, so can you do something with this?' I'm not sure something like that exists; in terms of waste, I'm not sure. In terms of logistics and transportation, one thing we may do is if we've identified that a supplier is delivering from an area and we've made a delivery to that area, we would pick up from the supplier and bring it back rather than the supplier sending it. Therefore, you are reducing food miles. So that's something that is done regularly throughout the industry, that's definitely something that's done regularly. But in terms of the food waste, I'm not sure how much collaboration between companies there is on that so I think that's definitely an opportunity." (S4)

Education

Reflecting education within the Food Plan

Education was a theme that was widely discussed by all of the stakeholders as a theme to be well reflected within the Food Plan.

Among the catering stakeholder, they discussed how education would be a really important theme within the Food Plan:

"P6: One thing that always comes up is about education-

P7: I was just about to say education, yes." (S4)

In the following quote, the stakeholder highlighted that educating people more about food will work around many of the challenges within other themes important to the Food Plan such as nutrition, budgeting, growing, etc.:

"...a lot of it stems to having a good education around food. Probably one of the things that's not highlighted in there - I think education is the one that sticks out for me. Not just for me, but when you sit down with a group of likeminded people and

you talk about food and nutrition and how we purchase food and money management with menus, it really comes down to the same thing and that's that people don't know. I don't think it's that they don't care, because I think everybody wants to be healthy, but sometimes people have to make the wrong choices. That's not down to them; they are forced that way because they either don't know how to cook or they don't know how to use a certain appliance or don't have an appliance. If you've only got an oven, there's only so much you can do. So, I think education is a big one. Even when I was at school, I had home economics once a month, probably, and it was how to bake a cake or how to make shortbread or flap jacks. Nothing there to put a nutrient-balanced meal in front of somebody, like, 'This is what you can buy from here; this is what you get from here'. We talked earlier about local produce and allotments and things like that. When we had our allotment a few years ago we had a school that went round all the allotments and my [1:12:01.8] was like, 'Where do carrots come from? And they were like, 'Tesco, Morrisons, Asda'. Nobody - You are pulling carrots out of the ground, 'That's a carrot'. And they were like, 'No, it's not! It boggles me, even - My little girl, she's a very picky eater, she'll eat what she wants. I've got no problem with that; she still has nice food. My little boy, he's a little bit younger than her and he will eat anything that you put on a plate. He was five last week and he's already talking to me about growing vegetables in the garden. I'm like, 'Let's go!' So we've been shopping. He wants to grow sweetcorn, he wants to grow runner beans. I'm like, 'That's cool, that's no problem' The only thing with him is that you have to watch him because if we go out on a walk somewhere and he finds a blackberry bush he will eat the blackberries off the bush before you've even had a chance to wash them. I don't think that people have the time because they are so focussed on work, maybe, or other things, that they don't really take the time to just sit and connect with anything else. I think as a race we are very one-way driven at the moment.'" (S1)

Another stakeholder agreed that education needs to feature in people's lives, however they also recognise that other factors such as the availability of fast foods challenge people's food-related decision making, highlighting the challenge is broader than the provision of educational opportunities:

"I don't disagree with anything on that. I think people understand the principle of healthy eating; I think putting it into practice is another matter. And the temptations that people have in terms of the availability of fast food is just frightening." (S2P3)

These sentiments were shared by another stakeholder, who highlighted that unhealthy food is increasingly available and that advertising is a vehicle for driving unhealthy food purchases:

"It's always been a big bugbear of mine that people can go out and buy cheap food that is not good for them, but actually with a bit of creativity and a bit of thought,

you can do a lot with less. It's just about knowing what you can do so it becomes about education and access to a decent kitchen that you can cook in and all those sorts of things. But I do think that there's a lot for advertising etc to answer for some of that."

Education needs to remove connotations around environmental sustainability

One of the stakeholders reflected on the need to educate the general public about how to change food system practices to be better for the environment as there are currently a lot of misconceptions about what is good for the environment:

"I went to a conference a few weeks ago in Birmingham and it was all, 'We are saving the planet, we are going to have a totally vegan/vegetarian menu'. They had avocados and they had peppers and aubergines. There's no way that's better for the environment than chickens you could have got from down the road. So, I think there's a misconception amongst the general public and society around what is healthy for the environment and sustainable, and I think we could do a lot more with educating from that point." (S3)

Educating about food preparation and food waste

They stakeholders elaborated more on their thoughts about the cooking capabilities of the general public such as deciding what foods to prepare and knowing how to budget:

"I feel a lot of people don't know how to cook; a lot of people don't know, they take the easy option. They'll go to a supermarket and buy what's easy for them to cook, what's convenient for them to cook. Being a chef, I know it's all about being prepared for the week ahead so maybe it's teaching people what nutrition looks like or how to shop on a budget better to create a vibrant menu for the week maybe. I think food, like with your seven points there, it ties into quite a lot. And especially here, because they are all values that we do look at." (S1)

Similarly, one of the stakeholders discussed the importance of teaching people about cooking, particularly the role of batch cooking:

"...educating people in how to cook, how to batch cook. We do it at home; we have a slow cooker and have a stew or soup. We do a soup, say, on a Sunday and enough for a packed lunch on a Monday, just freeze it and you've got two meals." (S4P6)

This catering stakeholder reflected on their own desire to incorporate educational activities in their own kitchen facilities:

"I'd love to get to a point where someone gives me loads of money so I can develop my old kitchen in there to maybe use that as a teaching facility in the future because after 3 o'clock it's an empty space at the moment. So in the future it would be great to maybe old some courses here or hold some adult learning sessions or something like that." (S1)

The food aid stakeholder discussed the importance of offering educational opportunities about food waste and food expiration dates, as well as the need increase cooking education opportunities:

"There's a big education thing. The number of times at larder that somebody goes, 'We've got to get rid of this because it's past its best before date'- No, you do not have to get rid of something because it's [line breaks] past its use by date yes, bin, now. If you think about all the cooking shows on television and people still don't cook. Cooking became the porn of the 21st century, people will watch that and then go back and - they watch marvellous chefs and then the stick a pre-made pizza in the oven. Some of that is on schools but also I think a couple of generations have skipped food education. And if your mum wasn't taught or your dad wasn't taught to cook, you probably are not going to learn to cook." (S2P3)

Educating about food, food system, and nutrition

Many of the stakeholders discussed how the public need opportunities to become more educated about food and nutrition:

"I think there's also an education element in that. The average member of the public really does not understand nutrition. I have a client who's a nutrition expert and food labelling expert and it's shocking what people don't know about food. And it's shocking what they learn on Facebook." (S2P3)

"Unless you are helping people to understand the education around it, 'This is why you need to be bothered by nutrition and this is how you go about doing it, and it's cheap'. Obviously, you ned to be able to afford the electricity but if you are heating up chips, you might as well make a soup that you've got for your lunches that day. If you've got a big, chunky soup with some bread, that can actually do you for quite a bit. So, food and nutrition, if they are getting it right is - yes, but they can't just expect it." (S5P8)

Similarly, the stakeholders talked about how people need to be educated about where their food comes from and about the food system:

"I think from our point of view it's lots of members of the public don't know where food comes from still. Shock for me, even some of our students that come to a land-based college, they still don't really know where lots of food comes from. So, I think from that point of view, it's how we educate. It's easy to think, 'Let's get everyone here', but they won't come here. So what do we actually do to get the message out there? Is it through blogs, podcasts, are there other ways of doing it? I think some of the programmes on TV very recently have helped in some respects - Clarkson's Farm, etc, I think has helped. But actually, it's still when you are sticking whatever it is on your plate at home, where does that come from? How many different supply chains are there, how many different people are involved in that? I was talking to someone from McDonald's, and they have this whole thing around the Big Mac, which is how many different supply chains there are to make a Big Mac. I think it's 30 supply chains to make a big Mac, something like that, I could be wrong. But it's just to make that one thing on your plate, where does it all come from? What are the food miles? It's fascinating. So, education is key from that point of view, and I think we could do more." (S3)

"It's great to have people in the community and volunteering but why aren't we putting value on people understanding food and where to get their food from? How to grow their food and how to nourish themselves and their families? That's really something that we should be holding to very high value, particularly when we get so much food in from external places." (S5P8)

Some of the stakeholders also highlighted that there are misconceptions about what healthy food is, and education should help to increase understanding about healthy eating:

"And what even is good food. There will be plenty of food out there that is...like the ultra-processed movement that's there at the moment, I think that's something I'd - it just makes sense. If you look at post-second world war, post-60s, cancer rates have spiked and I don't believe it's coincidence that's where we saw mass produced, ultra-processed food introduced into the diet. So I think there are a lot of misconceptions around what is healthy food and what is - I think that should form part of the education process as well. Just the minimal ingredients and as close to natural as possible." (S4P7)

One of the stakeholders reflected how educating people, particularly children, offers crucial life skills development:

"From what you were saying, I think education as well is the key because a lot of people are just not educated around food. When my eldest daughter was at school they had cooking rooms for the five/six years my daughter was at the school she never had a cooking lesson. This is secondary school-And for me, I just thought that's a shame because we're educating our children, but we are not educating them to look after themselves and that's where I feel a lot of those insecurities come in. Because either you've got the money to order stuff and get it delivered by Uber Eats or you haven't. And it's a real, real challenge." (S5P9)

The education stakeholder highlighted that supply chains have recently been embedded into their course curriculum, which has been hugely beneficial to their students in understanding more about the food system, evidencing the benefits of educating about the food system:

"In catering education sector, stakeholder talked about how their course contents are focusing more on supply chains rather than just about growing and production, and speaks of the possible reasons why this has become more the focus. The new qualifications, particularly around land base and agriculture, the core content is all around supply chain, which has never really been focussed on before. And I think it's an eye opener for lots of students. Eggs are a great example - brilliant produce, brilliant product if you can get it to market. But you could be the best egg producer in the country, producing hundreds of organic eggs every day but unless you've got a lorry that's going to go and pick them up and they are packed properly and you can get them in a shop within 24 hours, you've got no business. And I think that part is under-developed in terms of knowledge. I think the whole sustainability agenda is probably pushed it to be very much part of the curriculum. For example, not food related but we have courses in floristry and gain that core content on supply chain is also in there. When you look at that, it's crazy that we import still so many flowers, just so people can have cut flowers. If we were all far more focussed - the same with food - focussed on seasonality and that side of things, it would be a lot better wouldn't it?" (S3)

Educating about seasonality

In one of the group discussions, the stakeholders talked about the importance of educating about seasonality, and that over time people could get used to seasonality:

P8: Eating seasonally, actually educating people - and it's all education, isn't it? 'Here is the seasonal'...It is not natural for us to have bananas, strawberries, mangoes all year round, that's not okay. And maybe we really need to look at how we can do

that. That's tough for those producers but it needs to be restricted because it's not sustainable, it cannot go on like this.

S5P8: And I think people would get used to eating seasonally. Quite recently I was in Jamaica and one of my brothers - he used to live in the UK, he's been there for 2½ years. They live a lot off their land, he's got lots of land, and they eat seasonally. When we were there, it wasn't mango season, so we weren't eating mangos. But we were eating something called a Nashi apple and there were guavas that were coming in. And there were June plums that were coming in. You do get used to eating seasonally when you have to, so it's about, again, education, education." (S5)

The role of education establishments in food-related education

The food aid stakeholder talked about the potential role of schools in supporting education related to food. They felt that schools are well-placed to support this, however they are over-burdened with other priorities and pressures that there is little room for schools to meaningfully incorporate food-related education into school educational activity:

"It's hard to push more responsibility onto schools. I was invigilating exams at a local school this morning; I just don't know how schools survive. We want them to do everything, we want them to not just educate, we want them to parent people's children and discipline them, teach them manners and everything else. It is really hard, I think they've got enough on their plates already. The school I invigilate at does have a gardening club, which I think is a good thing. But shouldn't every village maybe have a kids gardening club? But who would run it?" (S2P3)

Another stakeholder felt that schools could contribute more to food related education, however they also felt that parents have a responsibility to contribute towards this education:

"Schools should be doing more to get kids cooking and familiar with foods, things like that. But I do think parents as well have that responsibility. When my kids were small, they were in the kitchen with me and at the age of 8 and 9 I was like, 'Come on, you guys can prepare a meal now'. I think it's about having conversations about food. We all eat food but I feel nowadays if you say to a lot of children, 'Where does this come from?', Tesco, Asda, they don't know where it comes from. So, we have to be having those meaningful conversations at school, at home, just to reinforce that." (S5P9)

However, similar to the competing pressure that schools face, one of the stakeholders highlighted that parents hold a lot of responsibility that it reduces their capacity to

prioritise food-related education to their children, however community cooking opportunities may alleviate this challenge and offer meaningful activities for children to do:

"It is tricky because how do you ensure - obviously the school is the thing that is compulsory so obviously that's when [inaudible word] different thing but that tends to be more mindful anyway. But then parents, particularly with young children, you've got enough on your plate when you've got young children but you quite often then looking for things to do, so having things - I know libraries are not necessarily cooking, but in community centres and what were the Surestart, things like that, basically what Spring charity are doing. So, you are starting those classes, and you are learning how to cook at a young age and the kids become part of it. I could cook a roast dinner by the age of 8 and my mum would just deal with the oven, pretty much." (S5P8)

The education stakeholder reflected on how their education establishment is the only one that focuses on farming for education purposes, and that they would like to expand this further by incorporating research and development into their educational aims:

"In the sense of local we are the only land-based college therefore we are the only people that have a farm that's purely for educational purposes. So our farm exists because we run courses in agriculture; without that we wouldn't have a farm. Therefore, it's a really tricky farm to manage because yes, it has to be practicing best techniques, because our students need to learn the best techniques, but primarily it's there for education so research and development. So, I think the direction that I want to take our farm in is far more around research and development where we can run projects to support the food network - what is possible, what can we do. And actually, I think hopefully though this project and others, get some tangible results to say, 'Let's do this here; let's do that here', and bring people together in a location that is farm focussed." (S3)

This stakeholder expressed a desire to offer adult courses related to community food and growing:

"I think we certainly could do more in terms of adult courses [related to food and growing], community-based courses here. One of the things I really want to bring in is the use of our facilities - evening courses, that sort of thing." (S3)

Further considerations

Sustainable change

The catering stakeholder reflected on their desire to see sustainable changes made possible within the food system and catering sector, rather than short-lived solutions:

"I think the only challenge that we face, and one thing that we are very good at, is doing something for a short period of time. For instance, National Women's Day, I don't get it - I really don't get it. For any day like that, we do here at the hospital; we do National Incontinence Day, national this day, national that day, and we make a massive effort for one day and then for the rest of the year, for the other 364 days, no-one talks about it. And then it comes back round to it and you are like, 'Oh yes, let's do it all again'. Don't get me wrong, I think they are very good causes and the way that they are spoken about on the day is really beneficial to everybody. But it's not just something that's for a day; it's something that should be happening every day. I think that's the biggest challenge. You would think it would be changing people's mind, but I think as long as you've got some really good influence and well-rounded people who are trying to push this thing forward, then I don't think it can fail. It's just when it loses momentum. It's just making sure that in three of four years' time that we are still doing the same thing that we want to be doing. Or even if we've achieved that in three to five years, that it stays there, it doesn't go away, or we build on it." (S1)

Networking

One of the stakeholders highlighted that they would like to see more ways to connect different stakeholder's to better enable positive shifts in the local food system:

"Probably the biggest challenge is connecting the right dots. We've got internal and external stakeholders; they all need to work well in order to deliver positive change. I came from a commercial background so working with agility, I understand that, but in the council probably that's not there. There's a hierarchy system there, there are different ways to go about it. From an operations point of view, you will spot gaps in the operations to make things better and you will implement these practices straight away because there's a cost profile behind it that's going to be saving you. Whereas when you think about it from a council's point of view there's one thing [inaudible] but what's the delivery like? I think that's where the failing is - it's great having a plan, it's great having an idea and a vision and a business model, etc, but what's the deliver piece? So I think the biggest challenge I see is probably connecting the dots to deliver it because you could have as many discussions as you want, it doesn't solve anything. You've got to take it from concept to delivery. How do you do that? What stakeholders do you need? What's your timeline? What's your path like? What's your stakeholder maps like? Who are your big players? Who are your

decision makers? You've all this, not just, 'We think this is what the plan looks like, what's the execution like?'. (S4P5)

A case study of a community initiative on Food Plan themes

What the initiative is

I work on a Public Health funded project. It's a collaboration between the Hope Centre, Cooking Good and quite recently Garden Organic. Basically, the whole concept behind it is to build capacity for growing and cooking in the community, so we train community champions from different community groups. The training is free and it's all-around cooking, growing, setting up their own projects; everything that they need to know to set up their own projects in their community. We give them Food Hygiene Level 2, First Aid Awareness, again all for free. There's also some grant funding that they can tap into. The only thing we ask is that they go back into their communities and do likewise. We also have a dedicated mentor, and she mentors them, she helps them. If they've got any things that they need, that they can speak to her about it.

Why the initiative is in place

The need to increase knowledge and education about food, growing, cooking and nutrition in the community

When I was volunteering before I started this job, with C2C at their allotments, one thing that they would do is the produce that they had from the allotment they would bring down to the Women's Centre and the women could take some of the food. And then as a back off of that, they asked me to start doing some weekly cooking sessions, so again we used the food from the allotment to show them how to prepare simple meals. I was amazed that some of these women did not know how to really cook. Simple things - one time we made a chilli con carne, we made a meat one and a vegetarian one and they were blown away. And when we told them how much it cost to prepare that meal for each person, again it was like, 'Wow'. And most of the time we could get it in a £1 a person. Where can you go and get a meal for £1 these days? You can't even get a sandwich for £1.

Building knowledge and experience within communities

The reason we don't go and do the training and the things in the community - we don't have that capacity. And also we don't know their communities. They know their

communities, they know what their community needs so therefore they are best placed to reach their community rather than us.

Impacts

Number of champions trained and community groups reached

And I feel it's having a really positive impact in the community. We've trained probably to date 90 or so champions from various different community groups. We've worked with UAA, United African Association, C2C, both the women's and men's group. Recently we did some training with [Dostiyo] in Wellingborough and a lot of community groups. Sometimes they'll just want to focus on the growing, sometimes the cooking, sometimes both, it just depends.

Building transferrable employability skills

Just to blow the trumpet a bit for Grow, Cook, Eat, I actually think that we do equip a lot of our champions with transferrable, employable skills. We did some champion training; we had lived-experience service users at the Hope Centre in September. There were, I think, four of them, and as a result of that, one of them is now employed on a part time basis in the kitchen over at the service. So that's given him that confidence, those skills that he's developed and worked on, to be able to gain some employment from it. I think that's how we've got to be looking at everything that we are doing, all the training that we're offering. It's not just about giving people knowledge, it's giving them skills that they can use to better themselves and their families. Particularly when, like you say, you've got a volunteer programme. You've got things where people are being trained up. They are getting a lot from it, and I think that's one of the reasons why apprenticeships are a pretty good idea, because you are gaining that knowledge in order for you to go off and do a thing. But at that point where someone is training you up, that's taking time out of their life and that can be tricky. So yes, you get paid a ridiculously tiny wage but you are getting a lot more. It's an investment in your future and whether you want to do that in the future or whatever else, you learn how to grow things, you can learn how to cook. You get a job in a kitchen, there is so much more that you can do with these things and it's very important that you do. Like you say, you are really a beacon of how you can do it because you've got a Level 2 Certificate in Hygiene, straight away that's loads of jobs that you could go into. Whether it's caring, whether it's in a kitchen somewhere, a school or whatever.

Fun and connection

So it's a lot of fun, I enjoy what I do, I really do. I get to meet a lot of interesting people, have some interesting conversations. I always think the best way to bring people together is through food. If we can get people cooking from scratch, growing some stuff for themselves, and just having that greater awareness about what they are doing, then it's win-win.

Building community

Recently we had some people come on our champion training from Semilong Green Spaces. They reclaimed a piece of land by the park, and they've done wonders on it. They are beautifying it, but they are going to plant things as well. For me, it's a community space so when people come by they are like, 'wow, you are doing a great job'. On Friday I was there, helping out, and this one old lady came and brought cakes that she'd make, she brought drinks for us. And she was like, 'You guys are doing such a fantastic job'. When I see things like that, I'm inspired. I've even said to someone, 'If everyone in Northampton too that kind of interest in their communities, Northampton wouldn't be as dirty as it is; it really wouldn't.'

Appreciation for the food produced

That buzz as well when you get - we don't have much a professional setup but our windowsill, got some cucumbers coming up and tomato seeds coming up and beans. And the buzz when they start coming up and when you pick your dinner and you cook it and you go, 'The majority of this plate is from our back garden and I picked that five minutes ago', it's amazing. It's a proper buzz. Oh, so good! There's no comparison. If you make your own, if you grow your own stuff that's right there, oh, so good.

The number of people and places reached in the community

And even some of the - I feel - success stories. I'll use the Spring charity. One of the champions, our first champions, was from Spring charity. When they started, they were doing a parents and toddlers group, just to get them used to having more food or different types of food. They started off with two or three parents and maybe two children. That was a year and a half ago; now they have a waiting list because they can only have 10 parents with their children. So the impact of that has been really good.

So for me, that's always a real win, when what's been done in that community setting has impacted not just the people who have come but the wider circle. And who knows the impact it's had on their wider families as well?

Demand for the champion training

And then other parents have said, 'Actually, I'd love to do the champion training', so they've come, they've done the champion training and now they are going to do a little spin off called A Taste Of Home.

Building the evidence

If you know anything about Public Health, you know it's all about the data, the quarterly reports. So we have to keep all of the data, we have quarterly reports. Last year we had an independent group coming in to evaluate our work so they went through all the data we'd kept and now we've got a much better system where we record how many people we are training, what impact it's having on them. We have questionnaires that they complete at the beginning and end. So we do use that to feed into what impact it's having, quantitative and qualitative.

The importance of sustainability of impactful community initiatives

The project is in its third year. Initially it was commissioned for two years but then Public Health saw that it was doing good, so they extended it for another two years. We've got funding for two more years, but we do have meetings coming up where we are going to be talking about its longevity, its sustainability. Personally, just from my knowledge of Public Health, it's not a bottomless pit and we are not going to be funded for ever. I almost feel come 2026, I feel they are going to start saying we have to really pull back on what we are doing. However, for me it's about leaving that legacy. So it's about making sure there is that lasting legacy. I feel a lot of our communities, particularly with lockdown, they've had things start and then stop. And communities, they are fed up; something is there for six months or a year and then all of a sudden, it's no longer. I actually don't want that for Grow, Cook, Eat. I want these champions to be able to do this for a long time, for people to say, 'Actually, they do cooking down there; we can go to that allotment, and we can do some growing'. So for me, that's what I think would be a real success.

Food aid recipient results

A detailed thematic map (Figure 1) was developed to create a visual representation of the relationships between the codes. Based on the thematic map, patterns within the data and themes were identified. Analysis continued until all codes were found to form a coherent pattern within each theme. The themes were then clearly defined in terms of what they represented. In the final phase of analysis, the researcher reviewed the data and located extracts that were representative examples of the themes that had been identified.

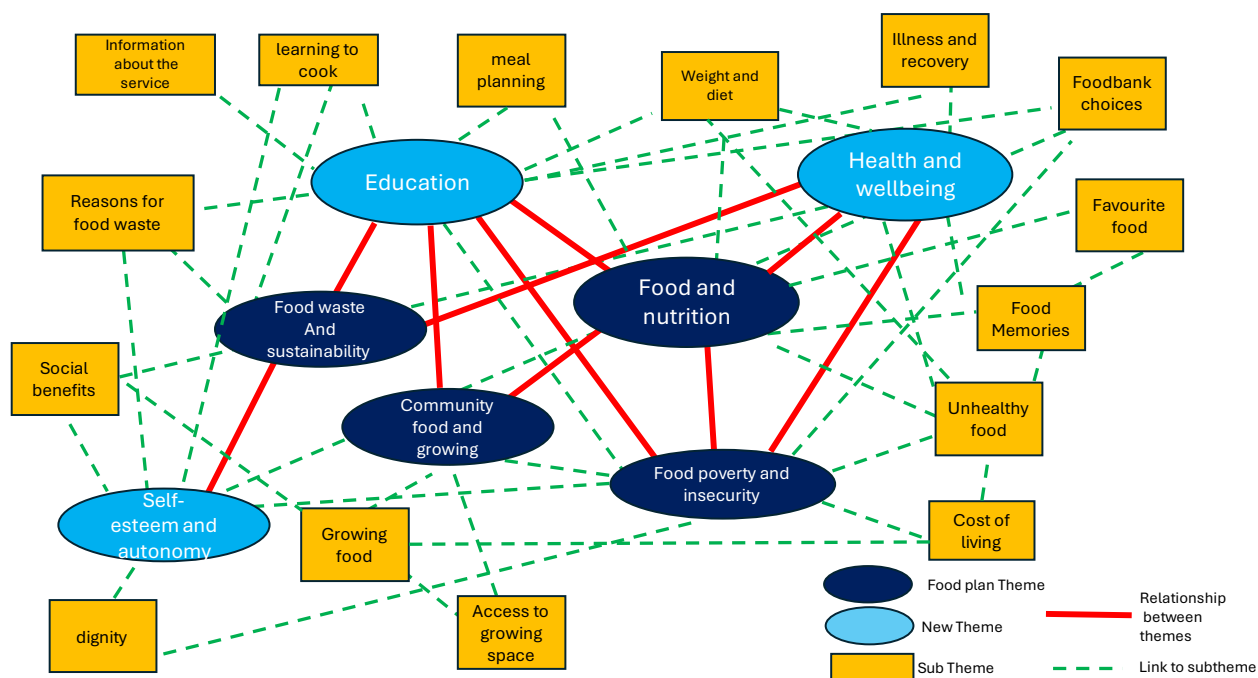


Figure 1: Map of themes and subthemes

Seven main themes were identified within the data, four of which aligned to West Northamptonshire's seven Food Plan themes. The first study theme, Food and Nutrition, features most prominently in the results of the results. The remaining 6 study themes represent the most important aspects of participants' responses to the questions asked. The themes in this project were 1. *Food and Nutrition*, 2. *Health and Wellbeing*, 3. *Education*, 4. *Waste and Sustainability*, 5. *Self-esteem and Autonomy*, 6.

Community Food and Growing, and 7. Food Poverty and Insecurity. The themes were consistent across participants. However, within the themes, differences in the specific priorities of participants were evident with a variety of subthemes identified that provided more in-depth context to the experiences and barriers described by participants.

Theme 1: Food and Nutrition

Food was an emotive topic for the participants who were keen to share their relationship, past and present, with food, and how their experience of using a food service influenced their attitude to food and the meals they provide for themselves and their families.

Participants were happy to share their favourite foods and memories of food from their childhood and were enthusiastic and animated about the descriptions they gave, demonstrating a passion for the topic. For most participants, these food memories were constructed from traditional meals cooked from scratch including lasagne, meat, vegetables and gravy, and shepherd's pie. Home cooked food that represented the individual's culture and heritage was also important, with fond memories of meals cooked by parents as well as affectionate memories of school meals were described in detail:

"I can remember school lunches. A lot of people didn't like them, but I thought they were lovely. It was the same thing every week, every year – fish on Friday, that sort of thing. And the puddings were lovely." (S3P2)

"a lot of West Indian food... my mum's been here since she was 8 so my mum cooks a lot of West Indian food and a lot of English food." (S2P9)

The relationship with the person creating the meal was a principal factor in positive memories, however not all participants had such happy memories of childhood meals with reflections of parents who did not cook frequently, and households impacted by poverty:

"We were a poor family; we didn't get a lot. Our school lunch would be bread with a smidgen of butter, maybe a bit of jam if we were lucky. And that was it we didn't really have much food growing up. That's probably why I snack on so much stuff now, because I can." (S2P10)

The free food (mainly fruit, vegetable and bread but also including surplus items such as fresh food close to or at the use by date) available at the food larders was a significant part of the participants access to healthy, affordable options. An important part of the offering was access to free fruit and vegetables and the availability of certain foods encouraged the participants to experiment with different ingredients that they would not normally try:

"This food bank does vegetables, so you have different vegetables I've never tried before. So, I do check before what meals I can make with the vegetables. I made lentils with aubergine salad." (S1P1)

Theme 2: Education

Early experiences of food had a noteworthy influence in the level of education and confidence participants had about preparing and cooking their own healthy meals.

Some participants described school experiences of being taught to cook as well as fond memories of parents teaching their children to cook whilst those who were not taught to cook were less positive and described the impact their lack of knowledge is having on the next generation:

"I was never taught to cook, and I moved out at 16 so I haven't really been given the knowledge how to cook. I find cooking very boring; I hate cooking, and my kids are very fussy. It doesn't matter what I offer them, they don't want it; I'll cook something, and they won't eat it. I just find the whole cooking stressful in itself." (S2P10)

As well as teaching schoolchildren about food and nutrition there was also dialogue about the need for a campaign for better education:

"I don't think a lot of people are still aware of what they are actually eating, and I think there does need to be a big campaign on these sorts of things." (S4P2)

One volunteer shared an experience of bringing in a nutritionist to support with educating a group of service users around healthy eating and meal preparation, but this had been poorly attended.

There were mixed responses in terms of the way participants plan their meals ranging from structured meal planning, list making and checking or "shopping" the cupboards before sourcing additional food that influenced their decisions about what to take from the food service as well as what they bought from the shops.

"I tend to shop for, my cupboards, meal plan and then write my list and then try to keep it within the budge that I've set. I'm very particular, I have a process. Even when

I write my shopping list, I write it in the order of the supermarket, in the aisles. So, I literally go in the door, down my aisles and out, that's it. So, I'm not dawdling on things because sometimes I'll look and think, "that's really nice." (S2P10)

Participants talked openly about what they perceived to be a healthy diet based on a variety of foods that were unprocessed and formed a balanced diet. Portion control was also important to the participants who also described the least healthy options being ultra processed or convenience food, high salt and takeaways. Fresh was best in the views of the participants who considered tinned foods to be less healthy, and tinned foods were described as a low-cost alternative that was not perceived nutritionally as good as fresh options.

"I don't tend to go for the tins or the other stuff, the processed stuff" (S3P1)

"People are just so busy nowadays, it's easy just to get a takeaway or throw a pizza in the oven or order a McDonalds. Especially with deliveries nowadays, it's become so much easier for people to just eat bad food as I would put it" (S4P2)

"Tinned food, it's not bad but it's not healthy." (S2P2)

Theme 3: Food poverty and insecurity

Participants were open about sharing their reasons for using the food service. They explained the process to access the service, including acquiring foodbank vouchers and needing to obtain a referral to the scheme. Inconsistency related to the information about using the service was a common theme:

"The problem being is I was told that the foodbank, I would be given five times a year at the foodbank, but I wasn't told I would have to go change the code number every time I go. So, I came today to get a top up and I was refused because I hadn't got a new code. That was a bit of a bummer." (S2P3)

Some participants accessed the service because of a crisis such as loss of their job, an accident or the breakdown of a relationship. Consequently, some were referred through Adult Welfare, others came across the service through accessing a community hub and decided which location to use based on location and convenience.

Whilst most referrals came from an official source, some participants used the service based on a recommendation from a friend or through local advertising.

"A friend brought me down" (S2P9)

"I think my sister-in-law said about it, and then I enquired whether I could go because I don't live here and they said it's open to anybody and the money goes to charity, which is a good thing." (S3P2)

"My son's nurse, they have a poster on the wall, and they have foodbanks and different food around the area." (S1P1)

Participants who shared their transport arrangements for getting to the service mostly walked or caught the bus. The convenience of not having to travel into the town centre was important in terms of cost and convenience:

"So, when my daughter needed this facility, instead of taking her into the town centre, which meant you'd got to pay for car parking as well, it all adds up." (S2P2)

"It was a bit difficult to find it because I came with the bus." (S2P4)

"Yes, it is far, but it is reachable because I came with the bus." (S2P4)

The cost of living was an important topic that the participants shared in the interviews. Participants reflected not just on the cost of food, but a lack of financial confidence and money worries associated household bills that would impact their ability to prepare meals:

"The bills were not getting paid, so the foodbank was a godsend" (S2P3)

Participants were reflective of the high cost of healthy food and the rising prices in supermarkets:

"I used to use Tesco, but I can't afford that anymore." (S2P6)

It was not only the cost of food that was an issue for the participants who described the impact of high energy bills on their finances:

"I haven't got any electric so I can't take any food that needs cooking." (S2P8)

Issues with benefit payments was also shared, with participants receiving universal credit describing the payment as being insufficient to cover the cost of living. One participant described a loss of benefits leading to them using the service in their financial crisis:

"Because of the Department of Work and pensions I must watch the pennies. Their wonderful computer went and did a job on me...so they said there's your money gone...so my dole money has gone from £390 down to £290."

The perception of the food service varied according to need and whilst most people were using the service out of necessity, based on the high cost of food and other cost of living issues, a small number of participants shared that they were using the service as a convenient and cost saving option available to them. This opinion was most evident in people using the service as a paid for food larder type offering. In these cases, the service was considered by users as a wider community service with social benefits and not based upon need or hardship.

"I love a bargain." (S3P1)

"It's not really the cost for us it's more because we live just round the corner it's easy to go in and see what it's all about and then see that we would use it." (S4P2)

"You don't get the social interaction (referring to the experience of shopping at the supermarket) and if you live on your own you want the social interaction" (S2P3)

"So, the idea of seeing the same faces every week is actually very pleasant and it's something I quite enjoy. I also enjoy the exercise, walking down here, it's another reason" (S3P1)

There was some frustration shared about the use of the service where participants felt the service was abused or taken for granted with some service users being greedy, whilst the majority were inclined to take only what they needed:

"Some people are very greedy, and I think it's not fair on others." (S2P10)

"If somebody can't get here until 1.30pm there's not a lot left for them because some people are greedy." (S2P10)

Participants tended to use supermarkets and shops to supplement what they were getting from the food service. This was mainly due to the inconsistency of items available and the absence of certain items including certain fresh food, butter, meat and frozen food. Some people were happy to manage without, and others chose to go to the supermarket for top up shops and when they had the money to do so.

"I do feel maybe there could be a larger variety" (S4P2)

"I can't get tomatoes or lettuce here" (S4P1)

"I do go to other shops when I have the money, but I do come here a lot" (S2P1)

"Adli and Tesco really. Aldi mostly because of the price. Tesco really for the variety" (S2P9)

A variety of other shops were used ranging from corner shops to Aldi, Lidl, Asda, Tesco and Sainsbury. For most participant the cost of supermarkets was an issue and determined where they decided to shop. Some participants explained that they would shop at certain times of the day to buy reduced food from supermarkets.

"I'm quite the connoisseur of the sell-by stuff. The yellow stickers – the yellow sticker king they call me!"

Participants talked about experiences of using other food service providers in the Northamptonshire area whereas others were not aware that they could use more than one food service. There is an inconsistency in the knowledge of the food service (including the transferability of codes) and wider associated support, how the process works and lack of consistency about how support is accessed:

"I had a chat with Anne; she pointed me in all sorts of different directions which I didn't even know the slightest thing about." (S2P3)

"I do the adult wellbeing; they've been a great help. They've pointed me in directions I wouldn't have realised I was able to go...and my councillor so to speak has been a good sounding board. She's 'if you've got this problem, give us a nudge'". (S2P3)

"I didn't realise I could have done (used more than one service) I went to the town centre because there was no way I was going out to the name of food service removed for anonymity one again. That was the one that gave me a dirty great bag full of potatoes" (S2P2)

"That's the other thing I didn't realise, if you get a number somewhere else and they say it's for the town centre one, if you put that number in it's a council number, you can still bring it here even though they've told you to go somewhere else" (S2P2)

Theme 4: Self Esteem and Autonomy

Participants at all the food services felt that being able to choose their own food was an important aspect of why they liked using the service. Reflecting on other services, this offer of 'choice' was not always the case. Dignity at the food service was important to the participants who found the experience of coming to the food service more like a shopping experience. This was a key factor for users of the service and linked closely to reducing food waste and ensuring people access food that they will utilise:

"If you have been given a box and half of it is not what you normally use it's like I don't really want to go back and say something because like you say it looks

ungrateful. But it also means that I'm only getting half the amount of food that I really need."

"The fact you get to choose your own stuff; you get to walk around and choose; you don't just get given certain things" (S2P1)

"It's more like shopping than somebody just dumping – I know they are helping but dumping food on you that you are not going to eat or your kids don't eat" (S2P6)

This view was reinforced by the volunteers and staff who reflected on the importance of people using the service making their own decisions about what they wanted:

"Some have said that this is the best food bank, I think they like having that to make their own decisions about what they want." (S2P8)

"I think the fact that they choose their own food It is more dignified - they feel it is a shopping experience rather than a donation experience." (S2P7)

The social interaction experienced at the food service was also a crucial point raised by several users who reflected that living alone there was little opportunity to interact and even the experience of shopping at a supermarket is now impersonal:

"I think the larder as well has become quite a big part of the community. I know people come here to socialise and they know if people are missing and haven't been here for weeks. So yes, I think it's very important for people to actually be able to have this area this space to come and do what they want to do" (S3P2)

One thing that has been pleasant doing this is the social aspect, I wasn't expecting that at all" (S3P1)

"When I go down to the supermarket, I'll give the electronic checkout a miss and I'll get somebody that I can have a chat with. It's something to look forward to (S2P3)

The lunch provision at one of the food services was an important facility in supporting social interaction at one of the centres and was an integral part of the offering and why people liked to come. This created a more social / community feel at the centre and encouraged people using the food service to stay longer.

"You have people to talk to. The do hot food normally it's pretty easy going." (S2P6)

"Here the food that they do, hot food, it is a really nice touch." (S2P9)

The atmosphere and the environment were important at the food services, but the staff and volunteers were important in creating an atmosphere where people were happy to be:

"it's mainly the people here, they make you feel really comfortable." (S2P1)

"The people who work here are lovely...It's a nice place to come, yes." (S2P4)

Participant valued that they were not judged for using a service based on where they lived, and choice was important to them:

"But here, they don't mind that you are not from [name of the area removed for anonymity] The first one I was with, when I joined, I was from there." (s2p8)

The following comment further supports a lack of awareness amongst service users and supports the need for better communication about how the service operates both for existing and prospective users. This may be a barrier to people using the service and may be an area for consideration.

"I don't think it's a particularly affluent area, so I don't really know if they are all [name of the area removed for anonymity] residents that come or if word gets about and they come afar. I don't know where they come from to be fair." (S2P8)

The benefit of one food service being located within a library was important from a social perspective. People gathered early not only to secure a place in the queue but also to meet socially:

"We all turn up at 4 o'clock to use it socially as much as for the food and the benefits." (S4P1)

Theme 5: Food waste and sustainability

Food waste was an important topic for the participants who, because of experiencing a shortage of food, were keen to avoid food waste:

"I'm grateful for the food I have got and because I don't have any money it makes me want to eat it more rather than just waste it." (S2P1)

"I'm grateful for anything I've got and not to waste anything in life." (S2P1)

An important way to avoid waste for some participants was the use of and access to a freezer and some participants talked about the benefits of batch cooking.

"If you cook it, you can freeze it you've changed its state so you can freeze it. But not everybody has got freezers so that's a bit of a luxury as well" (S2P2)

"You could get at least two weeks of food out of them if you do it right...I can batch cook and be creative" (S2P3)

A reason for some participants wasting food was as a result of being given a food bag rather than having the opportunity to choose their own items. Whilst this was not the case in any of the food services, participants reflected on other services that operated to this model and the resultant food waste:

"Getting things you are not going to use, you feel let down. It's a disappointment because you look at it, oh great I got two big bags of food then you get home, I can't eat this." (S2P2)

"I know they are helping – but dumping food on you that you are not going to eat or your kids don't eat. That's just even more waste then." (S2P6)

Participants were also conscious of the sell by dates on some items and linked this to waste:

"How on earth am I going to eat a whole great big bag of potatoes. Just me myself when the sell by date was yesterday." (S2P2)

Despite this, some participants were creative and exchanged food with friends and neighbours to avoid waste. This was replicated across the food services where a surplus of any stock was shared and exchanged with other local services.

Theme 6: Health and Wellbeing

Several of the participants were open in sharing health concerns including illnesses including diabetes, heart conditions, cancer, and high blood pressure as well as mental health conditions. For some participants their health problems had been the catalyst that necessitated the use of food services since they were claiming sickness benefit or had needed to leave their job because of their illness.

"I'm asthmatic, diabetic, I suffer with arthritis. I had a bad bike accident in 1992." (S2P6)

"So, I'm in congestive heart failure at the moment...on the waiting list for a defibrillator, pacemaker. So that's why I'm going to the food banks a bit more, trying to make my money stretch a bit further" (S2P9)

"I'm in recovery from an 8-hour operation so it is foremost in my mind at the moment" (S2P2)

Weight and diet were referred to frequently and participants shared their desire to be healthier through weight loss and exercise as well as making more healthy food choices. Linking to other services available, some participants talked about access to exercise and gym facilities that had been referred through their contact with food aid services. Others talked about the importance of walking and taking regular exercise as part of their daily routine.

Once participant made a link to a healthier lifestyle due to job loss and the removal of stress and pressure in their life. This had led to a healthier lifestyle that was to some extent influenced by use of the food service and a change in their attitude to food:

"I make smarter decisions here, so my health has hugely improved. I think I have probably lost about three stones since September."

Other participants discussed how the lack of healthy food in their lives resulted from several issues including lack of money, knowledge, access to healthy food (which was perceived as more expensive) and preference for less healthy foods which are perceived as a cheaper option.

"But they are very expensive food, the best food so you go for the cheaper food, don't you?" (S2P5)

"I'm not really happy with how I eat because I can't really afford to eat properly but I try my best" (S2P6)

"Finances are tight and healthy food is expensive. Generally, we need health food prices to come down that would help a lot" (S2P7)

One participant described their use of adult wellbeing services including social, exercise and falls team support and the connection to healthy eating and the need for weight loss:

"I've got a new group starting here this Tuesday, wellbeing group for me. I fall down quite a lot, it's a falling team, and they are trying to help me in a way. I've been before three or four times and they have not given me the kind of thing that I was hoping I need, one for my health and my legs. What I'm trying to do is trying to lose weight but trying to build my legs- "(S2P5)

Theme 7: Community food and growing

Whilst participants did have views on the benefits of growing food and the use of community spaces, this was perceived as nice to have rather than being a priority. Linking with the theme of education, some participants felt that growing activities should be included in the school curriculum.

For one couple who had access to an allotment, this was an important way to reduce food waste (and composting) as well as keep the cost of food down. An added benefit for this couple was the social aspect of their allotment:

"We don't know everyone, but we know our neighbours on the allotments and a few others" (S4P2)

Access to affordable local growing spaces was a concern for some participants who did not have a garden and were unable to access an allotment due to high demand and a shortage of suitable spaces in the local area. One participant was aware of a different food service that did offer a community growing space and said they were aware of how successful this had been, reflecting that this was not offered locally and would be an added benefit to the current offering.

Additional comments

There were a small number of comments based on the project being connected to West Northamptonshire Council. Some participants were vocal about the government and council and responsibilities towards people in need of food aid.

The perception amongst some participants was that they were forgotten about and not part of the Council's plan:

"It would be great if the Council could start thinking about us as well in this situation because it's not good." (S2P5)

"How you see it where the council do waste their money you think you could perhaps – they cut back on meals on wheels and that, if they could have more money providing these services to people." (S2P9)

"You hear when local councils have got to tighten their budgets this is one of the first things to go." (S3P2)

These comments reinforce the need for effective communication about the services offered and better sharing of potential good news stories about the benefits of the food services offered to the local community.

Summary and conclusion

This qualitative project aimed to enable the West Northants Food Plan to be informed and shaped by the opinions, experiences and needs of relevant stakeholders and public within West Northants. This will enable the Food Plan to be designed to be most relevant to the people who are affected by it. To achieve this, interviews and focus groups were carried out with relevant local stakeholders as well as food aid recipients (and providers), to enquire with them about the following questions:

1. Examples of what already works in West Northants in relation to its Food Plan (e.g. food governance and strategy; sustainable food; healthy food; tackling inequalities that drive food insecurity);
2. What are the gaps or challenges that are faced in shaping the Food Plan;
3. What opportunities are there and what actions need to be taken in order to maximise the successes and alleviate the challenges faced in shaping the Food Plan.

Summary of stakeholder results

Interviews and focus groups with local stakeholders provided important insights into the various strengths, challenges and opportunities for the development and implementation of the West Northants Food Plan. These insights span various parts of the food system and span the 7 themes within the Food Plan and beyond those themes.

The themes within the results all hold importance in and of themselves, however the detailed discussions highlight how the themes interrelate with one another as well as factors beyond the themes themselves. For example, high costs of living was alluded to throughout the stakeholder narratives and featured in most of the themes, where stakeholders emphasised how the cost of living makes it challenging to prioritise healthy food purchases due to the cost of food (Theme 1 food and nutrition), has contributed to the increasing use of food aid services (Theme 2 food insecurity), increasing cost in food production reflected in farming, catering and retail (Theme 4 commercial food production and logistics), pay rates failing to rise in line with the cost of living (Theme 5 food economy and employment), and fragile supply chains due to various pressures associated with cost of living (Theme 6 catering and procurement). This is one example which highlights the complex and multifactorial nature of food systems transformation.

Some clear strengths in the local food system were highlighted within the stakeholder narratives. There are clearly some meaningful infrastructures in place that support the food system, for example:

- there is food aid provision available to people at risk of food insecurity including those in some more rural parts West Northants (Theme 2 food insecurity);
- there are community initiatives in place to empower communities to grow, cook, and eat good food (Theme 3 community food and growing)
- stakeholders were able to make some positive changes in their sector and areas of expertise (for example, retailers recognising their responsibility for supporting local supply chains; caterers transforming their kitchen practices to upgrade their service off, and support environmental sustainability) (numerous themes)
- there are numerous strategies in place in various sectors that contribute to food waste reduction and environmental sustainability (Theme 7 food waste and sustainability).

Stakeholders also described a number of challenges to consider in the transformation plans within the Food Plan, for example:

- cost of living crisis and its various impacts (as described above);
- food policies limiting how much or what food destined for waste can be re-used and redirected to people and places that would benefit from it;
- recognising and responding to the issue of food deserts in more isolated or rural areas;
- challenges relating to mislabelling foods (e.g. no added sugar; one of your 5-a day, organic) and marketing of unhealthy foods;
- the need for education around food, cooking and the food system.

Within these strengths and challenges, numerous opportunities and considerations were illuminated that should be considered for future growth and development:

- maximise on projects and initiatives that are already established which show a clear role and impacts that interact with the Food Plan themes and beyond (for example, the initiative explored within the case study in the stakeholder results, showing numerous positive impacts), particularly through identifying sustainability pathways for impactful initiatives;
- consider taking forward the various ideas explored for providing education about food, cooking and the food system;

- consider the ideas and clear appetite for community growing opportunities for the public;
- build further awareness of the role of artificial intelligence in influencing the food system;
- use the power of supermarkets in driving positive changes within the food system;
- continue to build important networking opportunities for local stakeholders to work together to drive positive food system changes.

Summary of food aid recipient results

Interviews in food pantries and food banks provided important insights into the experiences of users, staff and volunteers of four food aid services in the Northampton area. The results highlighted opportunities for improvements as well as identifying important aspects of food services that are currently offered that were valued by the participants. The findings illustrate how an understanding of the experience and varying perceptions of food services could help the local authority to support more food insecure members of the community to access the services. In addition, there is an opportunity to attract more people who choose to pay for the service, recognising the broader benefits including social interaction and waste reduction.

Participants described physical barriers such as travelling to the services as well as the availability of certain foods and a lack of knowledge concerning the protocol of using the services based on a referral. The importance of dignity when using a service was a frequent topic raised by the participants and the benefits of making the service feel like a regular shopping experience was expressed by needs-based users. Positive marketing of the service that destigmatises use of the food service along with the normalisation of using a food service may alleviate the embarrassment some users may feel. Whilst none of the participants mentioned the use of online/and or click and collect/delivered shopping services. This may be a consideration to further attract new users who are currently avoiding the service through lack of awareness of the service, perceived stigma and or embarrassment or difficulty in accessing the locations.

The perception of the service offering lower quality food was reflected in the participants perception of tinned foods and foods close to or at their best before dates. This may further link to user sense of dignity and an association with the food aid provided being lower quality food. This may create a sense of indignity amongst users of the service out of necessity rather than choice. Interestingly, using tinned food and food close to or on the best before date was not a concern for those participants who accessed the service through choice and may be linked to better

education about what constitutes healthy food. Whilst one volunteer explained that a nutritionist had previously been brought in to educate around healthy eating and meal preparation this had been poorly attended. It would be useful to understand more about the barriers associated with this initiative and understand if there are opportunities to provide further effectively promoted appropriate educational events. These events could potentially explore topics including the mindset around best before dates, perception of healthy food, food waste, meal planning and preparation, and budgeting. In addition, volunteers and staff could provide recipe suggestions that specifically use cupboard staples and food that is in abundance to increase the perceived acceptability of certain ingredients.

By using the food services some participants felt they were doing their part to combat food waste and there was a sense of pride about using up food that would otherwise be thrown away. The social aspect of the service and the community benefits especially to those who are living alone was a significant theme. The complimentary services such as tea and a meal along with the opportunity to interact with others in a community space was perceived as valuable. There may be an opportunity to explore and expand upon as the social aspect of the food services was found to be varied across each location. This was particularly evident in the lack of community growing space and provision that was not available in any of the services in this study but was referenced by participants as a benefit at another service they were aware of. A further opportunity may be to explore this in more detail and how the concept of community growing could be incorporated into existing services.

Study limitations

This study has some limitations which need to be acknowledged. First although the researchers were trained in conducting qualitative interviews and used an interview schedule to guide the conversation, there is always a possibility of interviewer bias that has the potential to influence the depth and direction of participant discussions. Secondly the food services were all based on the same model whereby participants were free to choose from a selection of products. From the discussions it was clear that this is not always the case in the local area, and it would be useful to gather feedback from users who are only using a food service that provides a pre-determined bag of food. This would provide a comparison and potentially strengthen some of the benefits identified. Finally, whilst there was a mix of age, ethnicity and gender noted across the participants, the sample of 10 stakeholders and 15 food aid participants may not be generalisable. It is not known if this is a true representation of stakeholders and service users. Further research should examine the true

demographics of service users to validate this sample as reflective of the wider population of users.

Next Steps

This project provides an in-depth account of the voice of local stakeholders and residents of West Northants related to food. These voices will enable the West Northants Food Plan to be positively shaped in meaningful and locally relevant ways. Those driving the local Food Plan can use these findings to maximise the current strengths within the food system infrastructure, reflect on the challenges, and identify ways to take forward the many opportunities and ideas presented for driving improvements to the local food system.

Following on from this current project, future opportunities are available to conduct further research and/or co-design work with local community to drive forward the ideas that will strengthen the Food Plan. For example, if next steps are to take forward ideas to provide community growing opportunities, the researchers would be happy to develop these ideas further, conduct co-design work with the public to meaningfully design these ideas, and build and implement an evaluation of the community growing initiatives.

Research team

This report was produced by researchers from the university of Northampton. Any comments, feedback or discussions, please contact the project lead:

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